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Preface - Author's Notes

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Carmine Streaks

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Synopsis

Princess Carmine lives knowing that her life is already planned out for her: act royal, think royal, be royal.
No one in the SkyWing Kingdom would dare break the rules that brought peace for centuries.
But when she'll have to decide how far one of her steady-paced steps will have to go to stand by what she believes, that will define whether she will fall or fly.

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- PG13 classification.
- Fanfiction based on the universe of Wings of Fire.

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Author Notes

I have a very strict policy when it comes to writing, especially with fantasy, so I'll try to stick to a kind of plot or idea that hasn't been explored before.

When I write, I use *Italics* for thoughts, and **Bold** to emphasize things.

You'll find some closing words from me at the end of the book, but other than that I will not interfere with the narration of this story.

I wish you happy reading!

⚡Light⚡

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Status: Completed, started the 3rd of January 2019, finished the 19th of May 2019.

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Dedications

This story was originally written for a contest on the Wings of Fire Wiki. You can find it here.

https://wingsoffire.fandom.com/wiki/Thread:1865962?useskin=oasis#45

This book is dedicated to a dear Wiki friend of mine, who left last year. I hope that if you read this it will remind you that, no matter what, the sun will always shine.

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Prologue

Part 1 - Stepping forward
In which we meet Princess Carmine, heir to the SkyWing throne.
** Chapters 1 to 6 **

Part 2 - A broken heart
In which Carmine befriends a dragon that will change her life, for better or worse.
Chapters 7 to 12

Part 3 - True power
In which the truth comes out, and we see that true power does not lie where one might think.
Chapters 13 to 18

Epilogue

Prologue

[image]

Queen Titian was fiddling with her claws, as she sat near the red-shelled egg.

"The egg is hatching. Moons forbid... it feels to warm. It can't be- it can't," she thought, racing her claws for the eggshell.

King Forge gently reached for her, and pulled her claw back, holding it in his. He smiled at his mate.

"Everything will be fine, Titian. She will be perfectly normal, I promise you," he reassured her, his amber eyes mild and patient as they met her bright yellow ones.

She tried swallowing back her worry, closing her wings around her.

The egg, **her** egg, was due to hatch today. Titian had made sure it got everything: the best nest in the royal hatchery, doctors to come check that the dragonet was doing fine, and she visited it every time she could.

"You don't know she'll be fine. Moons, you don't even know that she'll be a she!" She growled at Forge.

She looked at the egg. It had nudged, right? She wasn't hallucinating it, right?

Forge regained her attention as he shook his head.

"That's a guess, but half the time, dragons consider me a prophet," he said, with his usual calm and bright voice.

Noticing that she was still very much not calm, he brushed her wing.

"Titian, I'm serious. The chance of her being one of those... it's so rare. There's such a slim possibility. And you've never even seen one

yourself, what are the chances-"

"I couldn't do it. If she turned out to be a firescale, or moon forbid an animus, I wouldn't be able to do it. I wouldn't be able to kill my daughter... what monster would ever do that?" She said, on the brink of another crisis.

But the egg didn't let her.

A crack ruptured the eggshell.

Forge marveled at the sight. "Look! She's hatching!" He said, raising her head with his talon so that she could see it too.

Titian gasped. It couldn't possibly be time... she wasn't ready and-

Crack

The dragonet inside was strong, it broke the egg with a powerful headbutt, and poked its head outside, shaking off the goop and eggshell pieces.

Forge had been right, she was indeed female and heir to the throne. Her scales were a beautiful shade of orange-red, and her eyes were the same golden color as her mother. She shared Forge's head shape and horns, which were the same ash gray. While her wings were unlike either of them: they were the color of pink roses, with a touch of dawn.

She looked up at her parents and yawned. Titian smiled, and picked her up gently, holding her in her talons.

The dragonet looked up at her mother with curious eyes.

"She's not burning me... she's not a Firescale after all," she thought, relaxing.

Forge looked at her over Titian's shoulder.

"She's beautiful," Titian breathed, as the hatching looked back up at her.

"Which means she needs an equally beautiful name," Forge agreed, he said as the dragonet yipped some half-understandable sounds.

Titian looked at the dragonet. Her neck had some stripes going down it, like streaks of flames. She had them around her eyes too. The color was what struck her.

"Carmine... we'll call her Carmine," she declared.

The newborn princess spread her wings, almost like she understood.

"Oh dear Carmine, sweetest of all daughters," the SkyWing Queen thought *"I was wrong to be so worried. I will never worry about anything ever again. You're normal - so, so wonderfully normal. And no Firescale or no animus will ever, ever harm you."*

Chapter 1

[image]

A bird flew past the window. It veered towards it to then glide out of sight.

Carmine was so bored that she imagined being each and every bird she saw flying by the classroom.

Why had Gust retired, leaving her mentor-less, and convincing her mother to send her to a normal academy?

To be completely honest, Pyre High Academy was everything but inclusive, accepting only dragons from high-rankings families. But it felt so different to Carmine.

The room was large and lit by large mosaic windows, with seats for the students that looked down to the stand where the teacher was, writing down the lesson on the blackboard behind him.

She had sat at the back of the class, and the teacher hadn't even noticed her or introduced her as a Princess, or dragon that was next in line for the throne of his kingdom.

With Gust, she was at the center of attention. Sure, that was because she was the only Dragon in the class, but this change was uncomfortable for her.

There were probably thirty other dragons in the room, all sons and daughters of nobles, rich merchants or high-ranking army officials.

They all knew each other and probably couldn't wait for recess to finally be able to spread their wings and talk freely.

Carmine couldn't wait for recess too. But she had a slightly different reason. She had no idea what was going on in the school and still had to introduce herself and her guards, which were placed at the entrance of the classroom, to the teacher.

"And since then, animi have been banned from the SkyWing Kingdom. But other tribes haven't realized the danger of animi yet. Can any of you list me what those tribes are?" The teacher asked, adding points to the diagram drawn on the blackboard.

Carmine saw that no one was trying to answer, so she promptly raised her talon.

The teacher saw her. "Yes, you down there," he said, calling on her.

Thirty pairs of eyes turned to look at the princess. But no one recognized her. Yet.

"Don't be scared," the teacher reassured her "And introduce yourself too. You should be one of the half-semester additions," he said with a flick of his wing as if the matter was very normal to him.

Carmine stood up, all regal and composed. Unlike most SkyWings in this room, she was used to being in the center of attention.

She smiled.

"Isolated Dragons Seek Altruism. It is a mnemonic device for IceWings with Queen Diamond, and SeaWings, with Prince Albatross, brother to Princess Lagoon, who is next in line for the throne." She said, looking confident.

"That's cor-," The teacher started, but Carmine interrupted him by accident.

"Oh, and my name is Princess Carmine. That's my complete answer," she said, concluding her speech.

What happened next was basically the opposite of a standing ovation: every dragon in the room did stand up, but they bowed down low to the SkyWing princess, who was left standing.

A few moments passed, tense and silent.

Carmine spread her wings slowly, a signal that she appreciated their greeting, and they sat back down.

"That was really, really, REALLY embarrassing," she thought, as she looked around to catch some SkyWings eying her curiously or whispering under their breath.

The SkyWing next to her even shifted away uncomfortably, not giving her a single glance.

"And it was also a GREAT way to introduce yourself. Way to go, Carmine. No one will want to risk to affiliate with you from now on," she added, rolling her eyes.

"As I was about to say, your majesty's answer is completely cor-" The teacher started again, but someone interrupted him again.

"Actually, she's not,"

The voice belonged to a yellow-golden dragon, with orange-red speckled wings and gray horns. He wasn't very big, but Carmine noticed that he held himself similarly to the nobles her mother sometimes invited to dinner.

"I'm not?" She mused, narrowing her eyes but tilting her head in curiosity.

The SkyWing turned towards her and shook his head. "Isolated Dragons Seek Altruism Or Self Justice," he said, reciting another memo "You forgot to mention the outcasted SandWing Jerboa. She used to live at Queen Scorpion's palace before running away. No one really knows anything else about her," he said, nodded at the princess with a smirk, and sat back down.

The teacher took a moment to think about that, and then nodded. "Yes, that would be correct, your majesty," he said, looking at me.

She nodded and sat back down.

Carmine couldn't take her eyes off that SkyWing. There was something about him that made him stand out. Her mind suggested that he must have to be brave to speak back to a princess.

She shrugged at that idea.

"Pfft. Bravery. That's something that belongs in fairytales".

Chapter 2

Recess came after what had seemed like an endless lesson.

Two guards escorted Carmine wherever she went. The SkyWing princess had not agreed to it, but her mother had not asked her opinion on the matter anyway, which made expressing it quite futile.

She stood in the courtyard, bored. Waiting for something to happen.

Which did, after a few moments of looking around.

Carmine recognized two dragons in the courtyard. She walked to them, smiling, her wings slightly open.

"Jay! Copper! I'm so happy to see you here!" She said, her voice warmer than usual.

Jay and Copper were the son of an important noble and of a General respectively. Carmine would have recognized them anywhere: Jay's red scales were very pale, contrasting his bright scarlet eyes and tourmaline tailband, while Copper was a deep russet, nearly bronze, with striking orange eyes and wings.

Carmine had met them during a royal banquet, and they had quickly bonded over several things.

She was so very glad to see some familiar faces here too.

But Copper seemed to shift uncomfortably when she saw her, while Jay whispered something quickly to her.

"Greetings, Carmine," Jay said, in a weird mix of posh and friendly.

"I didn't know you would be joining Pyre High," Copper added, elbowing Jay.

"Ah, they're embarrassed. They don't know how to act around me

because here I'm a princess, not their friend," Carmine thought, a little disappointed. Nevertheless, she kept her smile.

"I didn't either. Mother let Gust retire, as he was getting frailer and weaker with age, that poor soul. So now I'm here. I would have told you if I had had a chance to," She explained, sitting down next to them "Sorry."

Jay and Copper looked even more worried now.

"Wait. I apologized. Argh, moons! Of course, now they're uncomfortable,"

"What were you talking about? Before I came, I mean," The princess asked, in an awkward attempt to break the silence.

Jay smirked, which signaled to her that her attempt had been successful. "We were discussing Copper's crush for DUSK!" He half-shouted, obviously trying to attract someone's attention.

Copper was too late to shush him, as a deep crimson-scaled and golden-striped SkyWing, who was standing in another group a few meters away, turned around as he heard his name being called.

Copper ducked behind Jay's wing and raised her head only when she was sure that he wasn't looking anymore.

She then proceeded to efficiently knock Jay off his feet with a powerful blow, surprising Carmine as well.

"Copper's always been stronger than most. I couldn't really expect anything different from the daughter of General Peak," the princess recalled.

General Peak was known for his brute nature and extreme seriousness, as well as uncontrolled snaps of anger or violence. It was funny to notice all the ways in which Copper had always been so similar to her father.

"What the heck, Jay!" Copper said with anger.

"It was a joke, relax," he replied, as she helped him get up, with an

unreadable mix of embarrassment and fury on her face.

"Plus, it will be a year before any of us leave the academy," he complained, with his own kind of anger, "you shouldn't even be embarrassed by talking about these things anymore," he added with a shrug.

Carmine realized that was true. They were all fifteen now. This would be their last year of academy. After that, they'd be considered adults, and they would be able to finally live their own life.

"Ok fine," Copper said, composing herself as she admitted what she thought, "he is amazing. Plus, did you see the way he flies? I've rarely seen such mastery in acrobatics," she continued, while Jay had a look on his face of disagreement.

"He seems cool," Carmine added with a smile, trying to help her friend.

"You should totally go to meet him. Dragons may be awkward around you at first, but that's just because, you know... you're a princess. But, Dusk is the son of an advisor, which is great-," Copper continued before Carmine waved her wings, asking to speak. Her friend immediately stopped talking.

"That trick always works. Thank you, Gust," she mentally thanked her old mentor.

"What about the dragon that corrected me in class? Who is he?" Carmine asked, her curiosity winning over her.

"Oh, that's Wisp. He honestly shouldn't even be here," Copper said with a scoff and an expression of disgust.

"He's the son of a noble that **used** to be respectable **before** he became a traitor when he decided to sell information to the RainWings about our weaponry. Her majesty did, of course, the right thing when she executed him. Now Wisp basically has no dignity, which means he's not even a SkyWing anymore," Jay added, wearing the same expression as Copper.

"Oh... I guess that changes a few things then," Carmine thought, though she didn't really like what she heard. Life was so simple: get through dragonethood, find a job, build a life from it and don't mess anything up. Simple as that. How could dragons, especially SkyWings, the best tribe, get it wrong all the time?

"Anyways, I'll win over Dusk with my charm when academy ends, you can bet on that," Copper informed them, changing the topic. Jay rolled his eyes, and they continued to discuss as Carmine got lost in her thoughts.

"One year of academy left. And then they'll be free to go, fall in love and do what they always dreamed to do. Luckily for me, I won't get any of those choices," Carmine thought with joy. *"Life is so much clearer when you don't have to make any choices yourself. I can see my whole future ahead of me, planned and set. And guess what, I don't need any future-seeing powers. That's just... life as a royal."*

Chapter 3

[image]

"Blush, Glide, you can make sure the coast is clear on the way to the palace. There's no need for you to accompany me, I can make it." Carmine paused, before adding in a serious and commanding voice, "That's an order."

The SkyWing princess couldn't help but despise her guards, despite knowing that they were doing their job. But she had gotten tired to hear Blush's incessant chatter, or Glide's silent complaints, which she knew she couldn't do anything about.

The two guards nodded, and flew off on the the quickest route to the SkyWing palace. She guessed they'd be waiting for her though, and would be back to get her if she didn't come to them fast enough.

"One year. One year, and then I'll be free from my living shadows," she thought, as she looked at them flying away.

Blinking, she turned to look in front of her. The road was nearly empty, except the occasional dragons clustered to talk or walk together.

She smiled. That was her Kingdom. The SkyWing Kingdom. The best Kingdom.

"And finally, this is my time. My few minutes in which I'm not being watched. I'll just look around, and be free. It's worth the risk," she thought, as she walked outside the Academy's gates and through the winding streets of the SkyWing capital.

Carmine had never really seen the point in 'freedom'. She had what she needed to live, or at least, survive, and she was born with a great power: the inability to choose anything that affected her.

So freedom for her was like a fight she'd lost the moment she was

born; born without the power to choose. So why keep fighting, when you could find beauty in having others make those choices for you?

"I'm no fool, I can make myself be heard. If I feel something is wrong, they will hear my roar. But why should I complain about something I can't change? Why should I think freedom is something marvelous and essential to life if it's something I'll never, ever have?"

-/-

The time passed quickly, and from early in the afternoon, Carmine had found herself wandering until dusk.

She had told a messenger to tell her guards that she was alive and safe, but she doubted her mother would be happy about that anyways.

Though the princess had no chores to do, she had had time to pass to her favorite quill store, Sparrow's Plume. At least she would have bought something to excuse herself to her mother.

Carmine had stuffed her satchel so much that the quill she had bought was sticking out like the plume of a champion's helmet.

"I should probably be getting back, or mother will proceed to slice my claws off and making quills out of them," The SkyWing princess thought and proceeded to imagine in a rather graphic manner.

She started to spread her wings, ready to take off.

"Shut your snout, you traitorous serpent!"

"What... who-" her thoughts were as confused as her.

But deeper than that, another emotion was starting to claw her way out: fear

Carmine retracted her wings and tended her ears.

She slowly walked towards the direction the voice had come from.

Other confused voices reached her, but she just focused on following the sound.

And then, finally, she found the source of it.

Three SkyWings, around her age if not a bit older, were circling another one.

Their fangs were bared in very not-friendly way.

And the fury in their eyes sent shivers down Carmine's spine.

"How worried should I be? Who are these dragons?" She asked herself, before hiding behind a corner, continuing to look at what was unfolding in front of her.

"You should have left when you had your chance. No one would have stopped you," hissed one of them, spreading his blood-red wings.

The other SkyWing tried to talk, but he got pushed against stone wall behind him before he could talk.

"You're dead, traitor," hissed another attacker, and flicked his tail.

That was the sign.

The three of them surrounded the SkyWing and, shoving him around, they pushed down him on the stone road before kicking him black and blue.

"They are going to kill him... Right in front of me."

That's when she realized, she had a choice to make.

The SkyWing princess, for the first time, had a life in her talons. Even if it wasn't hers.

She had a choice to make herself.

*"No. This is not **my** battle. This is not who I am. If that Dragon dies, it won't be my fault... because I was never here. That SkyWing will die,*

*because he couldn't fight for himself. I follow my rules. I care about myself first and only. I shouldn't even be here. It's not **my** battle."*

And after an endless moment, Carmine made her decision.

No matter how stupid, or wrong it might have been.

Chapter 4

The SkyWing princess spread her wings out wide and made her move.

"Hey!" She roared, taking a lumbering step towards the other SkyWings.

The three of them immediately raised their heads and stopped hitting the already wounded dragon on the floor.

"Step away from him. It's an order from the Sky," She declared, taking another step forward.

One of the few interesting things that Gust had taught her was how to meddle with the minds of dragons using your words and actions.

"To be respected, you have to show dragons something worthy of respect," Gust had instructed her years ago.

So, now she was walking forward with her wings outspread, looking bigger. She kept her head high, while her steps were timed and equally distanced as she bent her talons before they touched the ground again.

And her voice was something else. She wasn't speaking for herself anymore. Her voice was the one of SkyWing royalty, law, and justice.

"Or what?" The reply came out sharp as the biggest of the offenders stepped forward, baring her fangs.

"Fly away dragonet, before Lance snaps your neck too," another SkyWing warned, staying behind what looked to be their leader.

"I don't follow your orders, but you better follow mine. SkyWing law prohibits unofficial violence against tribemates. So you better step away from that Dragon right away. It's an order from Princess Carmine of the SkyWings. Step away," She replied, as her voice

came out righteous and non-faltering.

It was always satisfying to see the expression on the dragons around her when she revealed she was a SkyWing princess. The only exception to this was when she was talking to dragons her age or whom she was trying to befriend: then it just became embarrassing and awkward.

And in this situation, the two SkyWings behind Lance blinked in surprise and took a step back, but their leader didn't move.

"Your presence flatters me, Princess," she replied, narrowing her eyes "But you don't order me around. This dragon is a traitor. He deserves death. Don't you believe that such SkyWings shouldn't be allowed to live?" she asked, her voice sharp and demanding.

"Whatever I believe, it is not your role to administer justice. Traitors are barely SkyWings at all, but insurgents are the worst kind of vermin. **So step back**, before my guards take you to the presence of Queen Titian."

Lance shook her head and smirked. "This dragon will die anyway. Good job on wasting your time, princess. Let's go guys. Your majesty needs to pretend to be just like she will ever be."

And with that, she and her associates took off. But Carmine will never forget the look on Lance's face.

It roared, *"Do something to me, I plead you. Raise a claw and see if it will make any difference to the big scheme of things because it won't"*.

She blinked, and she was back to reality.

The SkyWing on the floor was coughing, and Carmine walked over to him to assess how wounded he was.

His neck and back were bruised, but he had shielded his head with his wings. He was bleeding from a tear on his wings and a cut on his tail. Carmine couldn't tell how serious it was.

But as he lowered his wings, she gasped.

She knew that dragon.

"Hello, your majesty," he whispered.

The SkyWing laying at her feet was Wisp.

-/-

"Is he going to recover?" Carmine asked, looking at the doctor who had taken care of Wisp.

She nodded, looking at her. "Her majesty should not worry. The patient only has a mild wing wound and a rib fracture. Both should recover fairly soon," the SkyWing medic informed her, handing her Wisp's charts before walking away.

Carmine sighed. Her muscles ached. She had flown to the hospital to tell the healers about Wisp, to then lead them to where he was, and then come back with them to Summit Central, the SkyWing Kingdom's most known and renowned hospital.

She walked into Wisp's room. He was laying on his bed and looked up when the Princess entered.

Carmine talked quickly as if trying to say all at once.

"They'll let you go soon, and the payment for your healing has been covered. You should be back at the academy in a few days," she told him, before turning around to walk out.

"Thank you. But-Wait, please! Carmine, wait a second!"

She stopped at the doorway, looked back at him, but she spread her wings, enough for him to see the streaks of color than shared her name as they curved in an elegant semi-circle. And enough go silence him before he could even start formulating a sentence.

"I don't want your thankfulness. I interfered with your fight today because our law believes that no SkyWing should be killed unjustly. But looking back on it, I also remember that all dragons should be able to fight for themselves, and you not only failed, but you don't seem to recognize that this leads to weakness... and treachery...

which some SkyWings may argue runs in your blood anyways. Goodbye, Wisp. I hope your courage will heal with your scales."

And saying so, she walked out.

But this didn't impede her mind to wonder.

Would she have saved that SkyWing if she had known it was Wisp, the son of a traitor and a weak-hearted dragon all along?

It lead her to think deeper.

Why had she stepped forward?

And for **who?**

Chapter 5

During the following days, Carmine's thoughts would be almost always revolving around what had happened the afternoon she had saved Wisp.

Part of her had hated that day.

When she had gotten back to the palace, she realized that she had lost the quill she bought before confronting Lance.

This meant that her mother had, once again, scolded her harshly for not following the few and easy rules she was given.

"You're a disappointment to me, Carmine. You'll tell me the whole story at dinner, as I'm sure your father will want to hear it," Queen Titian had remarked, before sending her away.

Part of Carmine knew her mother didn't mean it.

To others, the SkyWing Queen might appear terrifying and powerful, but the princess had heard her rambling in her sleep and had seen her pacing before an important meeting.

She felt that a dragon like that would never actually mean to say something so terrible.

But when she saw her pronounce execution orders and lead battalions against the SeaWings at the far north coast, she knew that there was a side of her that was still at the mercy of the SkyWing Queen.

-/-

Family had always been a solid part of Carmine's life.

Discounting her mother, who never seemed to be happy with her; she loved Father, King Forge. She remembered the time he had stayed up all night with her, teaching her how to write and read

when Gust had been unable to. It had been one of the few times she had felt like a normal dragonet, not a royal one with responsibilities even when they were just one year old.

When talking about family, you couldn't forget her two brothers: Prince Ridge and Prince Spur, also known as the hot-head twins in the palace. They were just two years younger than Carmine, but they were not afraid of being scolded and would often team up against Mother. The SkyWing Princess had always considered them troublemakers from the day they hatched.

There were, of course, others in the vast SkyWing royal family. Princess Saffron was Carmine's cousin, second in line to the throne, as her mother, Carmine's Aunt, had been killed in a royal challenge. Carmine's other two uncles were both army commanders and were nearly never at the palace.

Out of her eight cousins, the SkyWing princess only truly liked one: her hatchmate, Prince Robin. They had grown up together, and Gust had mentored both of them, though never at the same time. Carmine always felt worried when she remembered that, ever since Gust had retired, he had been sent to train with the army near the coast, in constant danger from SeaWing attacks.

"He'll be fine," She kept telling herself, but she knew it was a lie. Robin was quick and agile, but he was as flimsy as a twig and wasn't suited for army life in the slightest.

She missed him.

And she missed him, even more, that night when she gathered for dinner with her mother, father, and brothers.

She felt four pairs of eyes look at her.

And she knew she would have to explain what had happened that afternoon.

-/-

Queen Titian glared at her until Carmine finished explaining her little 'adventure.' And when she did, there was a moment of silence

before the SkyWing Queen decided to talk.

"Carmine. How could you have possibly thought that what you did was acceptable?" She demanded, clearly angry.

Prince Spur and Prince Ridge started laughing. "Yeah," Spur said, his voice haughty. "How could you?" Ridge continued, using a dramatic voice, like the ones that tragic actors used in their plays at the royal theatre.

Her father moved to intervene, silencing her brothers, "She didn't do anything bad, Titian-,"

The Queen immediately disagreed, "It's not her job to make sure the Kingdom is peaceful. That's what the guards are paid to do. She risked her life, and for who, a traitor!?"

"Son of a traitor, mother," Carmine corrected her quietly.

"Don't talk back to me, young lady. You're in enough trouble," Titian silenced her, infuriated.

"But," Forge started, flicking his tail for attention, "she stood up against violence. Taken into consideration all the possible bad outcomes, the odds of her being actually harmed are-,"

Titian flared her wings out with irritation. "I don't care about your probability or odds or whatever comes out of your mouth. This is between me and my daughter, Forge!"

Her father looked at her and lowered his head. He mouthed 'I'm sorry' at Carmine, who understood his position. He couldn't talk back to her anymore; as of right now, she was his Queen and not his wife.

"Gust told me he had found another dragon who could mentor you. You could have left Pyre High Academy by the end of the week," Her mother started, "But now until you learn some discipline and self-control, you'll be attending that school until the end of the year. Now leave, and get out of my sight!" She roared, glaring, and lashing her tail violently.

Carmine got up, walked around the dinner table, head held low, and tried her best to ignore her snickering brothers.

She left the dining hall, and flew up to her room, silently.

The princess felt like she had just thrown her future away.

She'd be stuck in a place she hated. And for who? Wisp? Why him of all SkyWings.

Because she had stood up to her in class. Because he held his head high without any reason to. Because he was nearly killed. Because he was the son of a traitor.

Because when she thought of him, she felt lightheaded. She wasn't a princess anymore. He didn't treat her like one.

Carmine had lived every day of her life bound to responsibility and power she hadn't asked for, and forced to believe that the choices others made for her were her own.

But this day had been a change. Its highlight had been a choice she had made.

This day had been **different**.

"And if I could, I'd relive again and again."

Chapter 6

[image]

The days that passed were monotonous and in most cases, extremely boring.

Every day, Carmine woke up at dawn, got ready, flew to school (which was already a change from the schedule she had with Gust), survived Professor Sylph's lessons, flew back to the palace to read and attended evening aerial and battle training lessons with army mentors Mother had specifically appointed for her (she guessed at least because, moons, were they boring).

Schooldays had become even worse. Professor Sylph never made her do homework because he was afraid to strain Carmine's "precious claws", and making small talk with Copper and Jay became more and more frustrating with each passing day.

It usually involved Copper talking about Dusk, and Jay commenting on the quality of the education of the academy.

Carmine just nodded and smiled, because both subjects were extremely uncomfortable for her to talk about.

But she couldn't understand why these schooldays weren't as interesting as the first one had been.

But of course, logic came to her aid, and she understood.

It was because a certain SkyWing was in a hospital bed recovering from some serious trauma.

And that was all Carmine could think about.

-/-

The royal palace was having a feast.

A full moon was shining in the sky, and of course, the whole

kingdom was celebrating.

Carmine had danced and talked and feasted with the guests, but she decided to take a break and found herself alone on a solitary balcony that looked over the kingdom.

The view was beautiful. The whole SkyWing capital was lit by lanterns and there was music everywhere, both from the party and from the city.

It was in these moments that Carmine would truly be content.

She was a princess looking over her beautiful kingdom, with not one care in the world, and with power over everything.

It was satisfactory for her.

But of course, it didn't last long. About a month had passed from the incident, and Wisp had completely disappeared. She was meaning to ask a member of the Council if he had been excused or something, but she decided against it. He had done nothing wrong, so surely that wasn't the case.

"Stop thinking about him. Think about the moons, the party, the sky," The princess thought stubbornly.

She decided to take a short flight to clear her mind. She knew this would be, once again, a choice she made... but she knew it was a completely harmless one this time.

The breeze was cool and she had to blink frequently to be able to see. But when a SkyWing was flying, everything else in their mind would disappear, and leave it's place to an unconscious joy that would infect you from snout to tail-tip.

And Princess Carmine was no different.

The stars were shining shyly in the sky, completely overshadowed by the bright full moon, which looked like a white pupil over a dark iris that was the night sky.

The SkyWing princess flew over the city, and then higher, doing

flips in the sky, and looking over the kingdom.

"This feeling makes life worth it. Whether you're a queen or the lowest-born peasant. It's worth it when you're a SkyWing."

Distracted by her content thoughts, she nearly missed the shadow flying under her, quickly, and without spotting her.

Another SkyWing was flying up there.

Carmine smiled and decided to follow along. It was probably a city-dragon that was flying to the festival in the main plaza.

But when the stranger brought her to fly to the academy district, she had a feeling this wasn't a city dragon.

"Great job. I found myself following a bandit or an assassin. Amazing, Carmine, JUST AMAZING!"

But curiosity consumed her common sense, and she followed the SkyWing sneakily when he landed.

She was surprised when she saw that the dragon had lead her to Pyre High Academy. Carmine immediately thought must mean that the SkyWing was a thief rather than an assassin.

The great wooden doors of the academy creaked but opened as the thief pushed his way inside. Carmine was able to sneak between the closing gap just before the door closed with a loud *THUD*.

With slow, light, and steady steps, she followed him through the corridors of the academy. From the way he moved and the fact that he didn't hesitate one moment when choosing where to turn, Carmine guessed that he knew exactly what he was doing.

The SkyWing ran to Hall Cliff, the room where the SkyWing princess's class was held every day.

And there, she waited outside. Patiently.

Minutes passed, and the SkyWing stayed inside.

She cursed under her breath. The guardian of the academy was probably at the festival. He wouldn't be back anytime soon.

"Your options are two. You either run away and pray to the moons he doesn't hear you, or your go inside and pray to the moons he doesn't know how to use throwing knives...
Oh, screw it. I'm going inside."

She grabbed an empty torch, lit it up with a flame of fire, and walked inside the room, wings outspread, and trying to look imposing, like a guardian.

The room was already lit by a torch. The SkyWing was standing by the scroll rack, stuffing some scroll in his satchels. He reeled when he heard the door open, and turned around, half spreading his wings in a crooked manner.

Carmine's heart missed a beat when she recognized the golden-scaled dragon.

"Wisp?"

He relaxed, tucking his wings. His shoulder had still a healing scar on it, but his wings seemed to have fully recovered.

He opened his mouth and pulled back his head.

"What are you doing here, princess?"

"I should ask you the same question" Carmine replied sharply.

Wisp's face contorted in discomfort. "Unlike most dragons here, I can't allow myself to fall behind. I missed almost a moon of school, which means I need to catch up. Whether that means temporarily borrowing scrolls after closing time or not."

Carmine was surprised. She hadn't thought of that at all.

"I thought you were here to-,"

"Steal?" Wisp asked, raising his head.

The silence that followed was the answer he was expecting.

"That's what you get for being the son of a traitor. But dragons are never interested to hear the whole story. I'm leaving, so there's no need to call your guards," Wisp growled and made his way to the door.

Carmine spread a wing to stop him before he could leave.

Their eyes met.

"Wait... Wisp, I'm sorry," she stammered, trying to formulate a sentence. "You don't deserve to be judged because of your blood. I was a hypocrite, but I know how you feel. I would- I **would** have saved you even if I had known who you were, all those days back."

Wisp smiled. His smile had a weird effect on Carmine. She felt like she wanted to smile, too.

"I know. I know because I knew you were different from the day you joined our class and made an honest mistake, like any of us. You're a SkyWing, and we all are. So if you think that we're so similar..."

He searched for words, but Carmine had already guessed the end of his sentence.

"I don't see why I can't be your friend."

Chapter 7

Time flew by, and autumn passed its position to winter, who quickly covered the Sky Kingdom with a layer of white snow.

Soon, SkyWings had to start paying attention when walking on the roads, as they were covered with sleets of unforgivably slippery ice.

During that time, Carmine felt free. Free to disappear during the afternoon, and return just in time for the evening training session. And of course, no one except her family would dare question the SkyWing Princess, and to them, she would pretend to look bored from spending another day at the library or shopping with her "friends".

But in reality, she declined Jay's and Copper's invite to go snow-gliding or hunting with them every time.

Because, hidden behind the marble column of Pyre High Academy's gate was Wisp, waiting for her every day.

And it was with him that she finally had found the freedom that was negated from most princesses.

They'd go flying until they reached the sea, she would take him shopping or to a café that only nobles could afford, or they could just hang out in the library until evening.

Today, Carmine was tutoring Wisp, helping him out with a particularly hard arithmetic problem.

They were shielded from the cold and snow thanks to a rock ledge over them, while inside, the café was brewing with life.

"It's really easy," She said, tracing her talon over his messy handwriting, trying to help him out.

Wisp shook his head, as he tried to figure it out. "Wait-," he remarked, realizing something. With a few quick scribbles, he was

finally able to work out the answer and jot it down with numbers that were barely legible.

Carmine laughed. "How does anyone understand what you write?" She asked jokingly.

He shrugged but smiled back. "Not a lot of dragons do, but then again, not a lot of dragons read over what I write. Even Professor Sylph rarely reads over my work."

Carmine nodded. She always forgot about that. About the fact that nobody read over his homework. That nobody wanted to talk to him. That he had nobody by his side, from what he'd told her.

Until now, at least.

"Well, if you'd like, I could read over them. I might not be a professor, but I do have quite the skills of language if I do say so myself," she said, smiling.

Wisp looked up at her and smiled back.

"I guess," he paused, quickly adding, "but it's half-moon tonight. I really must get going."

And in the blink of an eye, he had already packed up and was ready to take off.

Carmine's heart dropped. She had a few hours before her evening training. She couldn't go back to the palace... or rather, she didn't want to.

So, she stepped after him. "Could I come with you? I've never seen your house, but I'd really like to."

He turned around and eyed her with concern. "Are you sure? It's not really the place a princess should hang out at."

But the SkyWing heir waved her talon dismissively. "Don't worry about that. Mother will never know about that anyways."

"And again, I'm worried about what she might do if she finds out like she

ever will. I'm making my own choices now. She will never know; ***never*** *."*

Wisp took a moment to think about it, then replied with, "you can come, but keep a low profile, move quickly, and don't leave my side."

"Of course," Carmine said as if it had been the most obvious thing in the world. But in reality, she didn't like the idea of following Wisp's commands. It reminded her of Mother's impassive orders.

"What am I thinking? Wisp is nothing like Mother," she thought quickly, but her mind also added in, *"plus, your heart doesn't flutter when Mother speaks to you."*

So Carmine spread her wings, and took off after Wisp, beating her wings to keep up with him.

He flew low, near the rooftops of the rock-and-wood cottages. Carmine could see the roads just two wingspans under her.

It reminded her of the Royal Parades, in which all the royals would fly low around the town, adorned with too many jewels and waving frantically.

It didn't take long, as Wisp weaved his way around the city, and then dove down to a lower level, a separated and wrecked plateau that looked over the edge of the mountain where the Skywing capital stood.

Carmine couldn't hold back a gasp.

There it was. Wisp's home.

Houses and cottages were stacked onto the mountain's wall. Shacks were built around caves. Streets were steep and dark allies. The square where they landed was crooked and the ground was made of murky pebbles. Everything seemed to lean over them as if they were about to be eaten by all the precarious buildings.

Wisp's home wasn't a home after all.

Because you couldn't really live at Broken Berm.

Chapter 8

In the moments that followed, Carmine tried to figure out what happened.

She had landed at Broken Berm, and then something had made her think about her choice again.

"Your mother looks down upon you. No matter how much you hate it, your blood ties you to her and to your power. This is the wrong call..."

She had looked at Wisp and had seen everything her mother didn't want her to be. But now, she was also in the wrong place, the lair of the lowest-born and most dangerous SkyWings of the whole Kingdom.

Her head told her to fly back to the palace, and forget about this forever.
Her heart told her to stay and stand by her friend.
And her gut told her that something bad was going to happen either way.

She wasn't a character in those adventure scrolls she used to read in her rare free time. Those characters would follow their heart and end up breaking it.

So she hadn't followed Wisp. She had stammered an excuse and had flown away from there as fast as her wings could carry her.

Carmine had hated it. Hated every second of that flight. She was scared. But not because she had risked her life by landing at Broken Berm, but because she hadn't been brave enough to stay, and be free.

The ties of her role overwrote the ones of her free will.

When she landed at the palace, she didn't talk to anyone. She didn't look at anyone. She didn't notice the parade of soldiers that had

recently arrived there and that were swarming the courtyard.

She ran upstairs, through the corridors and halls of the palace, and then flew upwards, to her quarters.

With a decisive pull, she opened her door, her mind seeking the refuge of those familiar walls.

But her room wasn't empty.

A SkyWing turned around to look at her as she opened the door. His scales were vermillion, and his wings were pink with streaks on them that resembled her own.

He was wearing heavy, gold-looking armor, with a plume of red feathers crowing the helmet between his thin horns.

Carmine felt her heart miss a beat.

She walked inside the room, closed the door, and threw herself between the wings of her cousin, Prince Robin.

And there, she felt safe enough to start crying.

-/-

"Wait... so you flew away because?" Robin asked, sipping his chamomile as he tried to understand what was going on.

Carmine had spent the whole evening with Robin. They talked about his experience in the army, and then the SkyWing Princess told him everything: her friendship with Wisp, their afternoons together, how she had left him out of fear earlier that day.

Robin listened, intrigued but respectful. They had dined together, and her mother had shown her some mercy, excusing her from that evening's banquet.

Carmine shook her head, trying to find a suitable answer. "I was scared. But not because that place is objectively dangerous, but because I was scared about what would happen if Mother found out... I didn't have the power to be brave."

Robin looked at her, putting his teacup down. "It seems that every step forward you take, you take two backward," he said thoughtfully.

Carmine took her head in he talons and leaned on the table. "I don't know what to do. I thought I could finally be brave, brave enough to have my own power and make my own choices."

Robin pulled back the corners on his mouth to form a smile. "I've spent more than five months in the army. We're all brothers there, fighting wing by wing. If one of us betrays our trust, we will never look at him the same ever again."

He turned serious again, looking straight at me. "If you had done what you did this afternoon in the army, I don't think I would have forgiven you. And now, Wisp would have all the right to feel betrayed. He's risking more than you, and you don't seem to care at all."

Carmine wanted to say, "that's not true. You're making it up. I would never become that kind of dragon." But it wasn't true. And she knew it, unfortunately.

Her mind was already starting to elaborate and seek a path to untangle this mess.

But luckily Robin already knew how to aid her.

He put his talons on her shoulders, and she looked up at him.

"Go after him. It's rare to have any friends that would risk their lives for you. You saved him from Lance without even knowing. Now you must do it again, but knowing that he's Wisp. That's what friends should do." Robin said, looking at her with kind eyes.

She hugged him tightly. Joy was clouding her mind. This was why she loved her cousin. Her reasonable, calm, and not-at-all a warrior cousin.

He let go of her and opened the window.

They understood why this would be safer than passing by the

Queen's feast. If she knew about this, she might even exile Robin for attempted treason.

"I'll cover for you," Robin said, as the wind buffeted his eyes, making him blink.

"Thank you... I've missed you, Robin," she said, with sincerity. Her wings were aching to take off, her heart taking control now.

The Prince smiled and nodded. "I've missed you too. Now go. And be careful, Carmine."

And with one last smile, the SkyWing heir flew through the window and towards the red-tainted twilight sky.

Chapter 9

Carmine didn't know if she had flown faster to get away from Broken Berm earlier that day, or if she was flying faster now to get back to it.

Either way, as the twilight sky painted the clouds with blue, the SkyWing princess was tracing back her steps. She was flying back to Wisp's home and wishing with all her heart that he would forgive her.

Broken Berm was already lit by a couple of fires. Some badly made torches were lighting the paths of the streets, and Carmine noticed that there was no one flying around the skyspace.

But the really scary thing was the silence. As Carmine landed in a plaza that looked similar to then one Wisp had brought her to, she saw that even though some SkyWings were still stirring, no sounds came out of the houses.

Carmine looked around her. She would never be able to find her way around this place. Asking for help wasn't an option either - you wouldn't know if you were talking to a goat hunter or a thief, ready to keep you hostage... or even kill you if needed. Those were the rumors surrounding Broken Berm. And they were probably the reason why Carmine had never visited it before today.

"I could test my luck. If I find a market or a shop, I could ask if they know anything about a dragon named Wisp." She thought, tapping with her talons as she tried to convince herself this whole plan wasn't crazy.

In the end, she picked the broadest road that connected to the plaza, and walked quietly, checking her sides. She didn't know where she was going, and she didn't know what she would do when she found Wisp. But she tried to concentrate on something else and ended up counting her steps to distract herself.

She turned some corners, walked down an alley, go eyed by a SkyWing who smirked at her, and then found herself in front of another plaza.

She must have been in a market square, judging from the open space, wooden stands and cloth pieces hanging to form a tent-like structure over the place. If it wasn't for the tears and burns on the material, Carmine would have nearly felt better.

There was only one dragon still at the place. She was a bulky female with red scales and brown spines, who was packing up her merchandise and getting ready to leave. Judging from her size, Carmine thought she might be just a few years younger than her mother.

"Hello there?" Carmine said, out loud. The SkyWing didn't turn around. Carmine walked up behind her and tapped her wing with her own.

Usually, that would be a sign of courtesy and respect. But this dragon must have thought otherwise, because, in a blink of an eye, her dagger was pressing against Carmine's neck.

The princess took short, shallow breaths. The SkyWing in front of her bared her fangs, and that was when Carmine noticed that one side of her face was black with a healing burn scar. She had to control herself as she tried to not stare.

"What do you want?" She bellowed, clicking her fangs in an intimidatory fashion. Carmine had to hang to every shred of self-control in her to not flinch away.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I-I was looking for a dragon named Wisp," she said, and that was all she could manage to say without having her voice shake.

The SkyWing retracted her dagger and took a step back. "The little Wisp from Pyre Academy? He got into more trouble already? That poor scarp, always getting into troublesome situations. Very well. He lives on the far edge of the Berm - you can't miss his shack, it's the one right under the thunderstruck pine," she said pointing

vaguely toward the east. Her attitude towards Wisp was nearly friendly, like if he was Broken Berm's punchline.

"Thank you," Carmine said with a curt nod.

The other SkyWing tilted her head with suspicion. "You don't seem like you're from Broken Berm..." there was a pause in which Carmine held her breath in fear... Had she been recognized? Were the stories about the Berm too? Would she be held hostage and have her teeth plucked out?

But then the SkyWing continued, "anyways if you're ever in need of a trusty dagger, come looking for me. Everyone here knows of Half-face," she said with a proud smile, which nearly made the princess shiver.

Carmine gave Half-face a small smile and took off. She had to shake herself various times to try to feel less anxious.

The SkyWing had been right about one thing: Wisp's home was indeed easy to find.

There was only one thunderstruck pine on the whole mountainside. As the princess got closer, she saw that the tree was just behind the shack and if it cracked it would crash right over Wisp's modest home.

Carmine landed lightly in front of it. There was some open space in front of it, enough for a small plaza to have formed.

Wisp's shack was small but looked stable. Some wooden planks have been nailed together with rusted nails and the roof seemed made of hay and wood melded together. In front of the house, someone had layout a mat of sawdust.

Unlike the other houses of Broken Berm, which were stashed one over the other carelessly, Wisp had no neighbors and seemed to be isolated under the thunderstruck pine tree.

Carmine couldn't help feeling a little bit of pity for his friend. But she knew that she still had to talk it out with him.

She took a few steps forward and knocked on the door lightly. It fell right as the SkyWing's talon knocked and hit the ground with a loud *THUD*.

Carmine flinched back but recovered quickly. She looked inside. It wasn't a big house, and most of the walls were stashed with either food, school material or building supplies. On rock ground, a fireplace was crackling.

But Wisp wasn't there.

Carmine looked outside again. He wasn't around. That was until she lifted her head.

There he was.

Carmine flew up to him. He was sitting on the thunderstruck pine, hanging on to the trunk with his claws. His form was a silhouette against the moonlight.

She landed lightly and sat next to him. He didn't turn around to look at her.

Carmine decided she couldn't hold back anymore. She broke the silence.

"I might have broken your door... I thought it would actually open... but I guess it did," she said, trying to make a joke.

Wisp remained impassive. His view seemed to be concentrated on the Diamond Spay river, which was visible in the distance.

"Also, Robin came back! Do remember him? He's my cousin, the one I was telling you about!" She said, with joy.

But again, Wisp remained silent.

"He's waiting to hear your heart speak. And your heart brought you safely here... so perhaps I should set I free once again."

"I'm sorry, ok? I didn't know what to think, and I was scared. I was scared that Mother would find out and that she would keep me

inside the palace until I became crazy. I didn't think about how much you were risking, and for that I am sorry," she paused, looking into the distance too. "I'm not used to apologizing because I'm not used to being wrong... but I'm selfish, scared and I'm not perfect. We're not similar, Wisp. I don't think you deserve a friend like me... I'm sorry to have deceived you into thinking I could be anything else."

Wisp finally looked at Carmine. She got lost in those eyes.

"I'm not perfect either, Carmine. I'm hopeful, weak and I don't share my thoughts with many. I don't tell dragons how I feel, and this has cost me so many things," Wisp said, with a steady voice.

He took her talon gently. Carmine was a little taken aback, as she felt her heart flutter.

"But I told you that I wanted you as a friend. I'm not similar to you. But whenever I look at you, I feel braver. I feel like it doesn't matter that I live at Broken Berm or that I can't afford the school scrolls. You **saved** me, Carmine. I wouldn't give up this feeling for anything in the world. I want you by my side even if it means that you'll sometimes have to take a step back," he continued.

The SkyWing princess nodded. "I'll be by your side. From now on, I'll never falter. Because you saved **me** too. You gave me freedom. And you gave me the kind of hope that intoxicates your heart," Carmine said and smiled. "So whether I'm a princess or not, I want us to be friends."

"Forever."

Wisp opened his wings and wrapped them around Carmine.

Together their hearts took flight as they looked on to the Kingdom of Sky.

Carmine wished she could be frozen in time. Because that moment would change her life beyond anything she could imagine.

Chapter 10

With spring's arrival, winter gave its place to warmth, flowers... and rain.

Carmine had never liked the rain. Whether it was the incessant and timed thicker of each drop or the gray and cloud-filled skies, she had always hated that weather the most.

Consequently, the SkyWing Princess was very annoyed when she found out that Wisp liked it just as much as Robin did.

"It's an annoying weather... water gets through the roof cracks if I don't mend them. **But** flying through storms makes it all worth it, obviously," he had remarked with glee once.

But luck had come to aid her once again. Because it wasn't just a normal spring day with rain sprinkling the kingdom.

It was the best day of the year. It was **supposed** to be glorious...

It was Carmine's hatching day.

"And its raining. Great. Thanks, sky," she thought with annoyance as she had looked out of her room's window.

Wisp wasn't at the academy that day. Carmine was disappointed and didn't try to hide it. But her laborious friend had recently found a side job as a carpenter. It was an awful job, and he would sometimes meet up with him with terrible cuts on his wings and talons. But Wisp never complained, and always tried to balance work, education and friendship as best he could.

She walked quietly to their meeting spot, rain pouring down her wings and thinking about what he might be doing. But he wasn't there, though someone was indeed waiting there.

Robin smiled at her as she approached him. "Happy hatching day!" He said, his voice cheerful. They hugged, and she smiled.

"Thanks... that's very nice of you," she said, but he waved casually.

"You think I'd forget about my favorite cousin's birthday? Pfft. Even Saffron is coming to the feast in your honor this evening and you **know** she hates you," he said with a smile, as she snickered.

"I was thinking we could go to Garnet Café? Maybe Wisp will be waiting there. He didn't even turn up at school today... I was kind of sad," Carmine asked, flicking her wings, and getting ready to start walking.

But Robin held her back, touching her wing. She turned to look at him, confused. "I don't know... I was kind of thinking we could go to the palace? I have this very cool new armor I'd like to show you... plus the morning patrol today really wore me out," he said, scratching his neck with an annoyed look.

Carmine was even more confused now. "Oh come on Robin. It's my hatching day! Let's go out to find Wisp and we can celebrate before the 'party' tonight!" She said, with a good-hearted smile.

But he shrugged, looking even more annoyed. "I want to celebrate with you Carmine, it's obvious. But there's no point to go at Garnet Cafe. Wisp won't be there... as usual."

Carmine looked at Robin for one more moment, trying to understand why suddenly her cousin had become so... bored?

But somehow the piece she needed to complete this puzzle was already in her talon.

"Oh, ok," she said, understanding everything suddenly. She took off after Robin, angry, as rain batted her scales.

"It's about Wisp, right?" She paused. "You're just like the others. Since he lives at Broken Berm, so you despise automatically? He's better than that! You seemed like you were friends!" She growled when she caught up with Robin. She was beating her wings furiously and didn't even care that they were going to the palace anymore.

"I thought you were better than them! I thought you were smarter

than them! At least I hoped you could see that not all prejudices are real!" She snarled as they walked through the halls of the SkyWing palace, but not loud enough for the guards to hear.

Robin didn't say a word. He walked quietly, a defiant look on his face. He paused when they reached her room. The Prince looked down at her. "I guess that's one way to see this."

He opened the door.

In front of them, stood Wisp, smiling. Some messy decorations and lanterns had been hanged across the room. And she caught a glimpse of sunlight through the room's curtains.

"Happy hatching day!" Robin and Wisp shouted almost simultaneously.

Carmine smiled and tried to cover her face with her talons, but was unable to.

"This is for me?" She asked, looking awestruck.

Robin smiled and nodded. "Yup. I knew you wouldn't come here naturally so I had to get you to rant first, so you could follow me."

Carmine blushed and laughed awkwardly. She knew that was true. She hugged him, thankful to have him as a blood relative, as well as a friend.

"Wisp was here all day decorating, though I had to smuggle him past the guards..." Robin continued, gesturing with his wings as they settled inside, where Carmine could smell caramelized deer already.

"It was worth it," Wisp said, with a smile. He passed her a small box, made with wood. "That's for you. It's just a small gift."

Carmine just smiled. Whatever she said after was muffled by joy and warmth spreading through as she thanked her friend.

That warmth stuck with her throughout the rest of the day.

Even when going to sleep after the feats, she mentally thanked Robin... but her heart was still beating faster when she thought about Wisp.

"He's the best friend I could have ever asked for... he's loyal, golden-hearted and kind..."

And just before she could fall asleep, she thought about something else. Something important.

"I need to find a way for others to see it, too."

Chapter 11

"I need to find a way for others to see it, too."

That thought echoed back in Carmine's head as she held Wisp's talon. The SkyWing princess wanted him to be a part of her world, not a secret hidden from everyone she knew. They needed to deceive the others. She needed the other SkyWings to see him as a friend to the crown, not the son of a traitor. That way, she could protect him from her mother's wrath.

Wisp was starting to wake up, but when he blinked, the grasp on Carmine's talon tightened, as the SkyWing felt pain surge through him.

"Ow! Owwww... that hurts A LOT," he said, once he stood up from the bed with hesitant movements.

Carmine felt her heart clutch as she saw him rise, hurting but with no way for her to help him.

Three moons had passed since her hatching day and she and Robin had celebrated Wisp's together shortly after their final exams. As a present, the two had picked out a set of embedding amethysts; gems destined to be embedded in a dragon's scales to make them look... precious? Carmine couldn't get around to understanding why dragons thought it would be fashionable, but most nobles wore them, and if they needed to find a way to make Wisp look like one of them, this was their best shot.

I need to find a way for others to see it, too... Carmine would have **never** imagined that it was his looks that needed fixing for the deception to succeed. In her opinion, those were already perfect.

A stylist had embedded the amethysts over Wisp's eyes and along his spine. Carmine had suggested to use fire to burn out the scales while he was tranquilized, but Wisp had refused strongly, opting for the more painful carving technique. The SkyWing princess

wondered why he had made that choice. It had almost seemed like he had been **afraid** of fire.

He had woken up after the operation and pain had hit him like an avalanche. He couldn't fly for several days after that, and he barely left him guest room anyways.

Carmine had given him a room next to hers after the end of the school semester. She wasn't worried about her mother finding out, because the SkyWing queen never came into her quarters of the castle. Titian always had more important things to do than to visit her daughter.

The SkyWing princess had found herself lingering outside Wisp's room in the day that followed the operation, twisting her talons and wondering if to enter or not. It gave her flashbacks from when she had brought him to the medics after his confrontation with the SkyWing known as Lance. At that time, she hadn't cared much for the golden-scales SkyWing, caring too much about her power to dare to make a choice. Moons had she grown from that day.

After around half an hour of indecisiveness, she decided to go for a walk to clear her mind. She already had a place in mind.

The SkyWing gardens were one of Carmine's favorite places to meditate and think. The flowers were bloomed and the soft grass caressed her talons as she walked through the alleys of the wild ferns.

She remembered her first fight had happened in this place. It had been with Princess Saffron, over a peculiarly red and good-smelling rose. Carmine had wanted to wait before picking the flower so that it could continue growing, but the older princess had shoved her to the side, picking the flower and insisting that the roots would "find a way to plow through the ground to seize the victory of a glorious life."

Thinking about it now, Saffron had grown a reputation in the palace of saying things that didn't always make an awful lot of sense. Despite this, the headstrong and cold-hearted princess had always been one of her mother's favorite dragons.

In the past, this had made Carmine suffer a lot. Now, she had nearly accepted that she would never be Saffron and that perhaps that wasn't so bad after all.

As she moved to the rose gardens, she heard whispers and halted. She proceeded slowly, trying to be stealthy but not sneaky. This was **her** palace, after all.

As she saw the dragons that were also having a walk in the garden she smiled, and called out their names, not realizing what was going on.

Jay had one wing wrapped around Copper, who was crumbled to the ground, crying. They both raised their heads when they saw Carmine, whose eyes widened when she saw her friend's expression.

"Jay... oh my sky. Copper, dear, what happened?" She asked, advancing towards her friends, tilting her head in concern. But Copper got free of Jay's hold and walked off, assuming a composed look and drying off her tears before leaving.

Jay looked after her as she left, then lowered his snout too. Carmine walked to him before looking towards where Copper had left too and then back at Jay.

"What happened to her? Is she... ok?" She tried, using a more informal vocabulary.

Jay shook his head. "Remember Dusk, that rock-head of an acrobat that Copper liked earlier this year?"

Carmine nodded but didn't add anything. She was starting to piece a story together.

"Well, Copper ran head-first into her crush and got rejected in a rather harsh way. I almost had to resort to using my fire to calm his stupid insults. He called her all sorts of things, prin- Carmine. He said her father was the reason us SkyWing still didn't have control over the Kingdom of Sea. And I think that they cut right through Copp's armor," he explained with a worried expression.

Carmine was upset but didn't lose her cool. "Do you want me to

send some guards after him?"

Jay shook his head. "She's strong. I've known her for a lot of time. She just needs some time to realize how stupid Dusk is and how she'll soar even higher now."

Carmine nodded. Copper was everything but weak. She was everything a good warrior needed to be: brave, fiery but not heartless.

"You two seem pretty close. I'm sure you know best," She agreed.

"Well, she doesn't really know- never mind. How's your friend from Broken Berm doing?" Jay said, interrupting his first sentence quite suddenly.

"Oh, Wisp?" Carmine said, blinking, "he's doing better. He hasn't left his room yet though."

"Oh really? I swear I had seen him talk with the king this morning," Jay said with a small smile.

"What? Really! That is great," Carmine said way too quickly.

"You two seem to be quite close too. If it official yet? Are you two the newest royal couple?" Jay asked, smiling.

Carmine laughed under her breath, "we're not official, but... I suppose I'd like to find that out soon."

"Well, I suppose there's no better time than now. And, if for whatever stupid reason he should turn you down, I'll be here. I've already done this once today," he said with a shrug and a smile.

"All right. But I suppose that when things have calmed down that you should go tell Copp that you like her as well..."

"Carmine! I-," the SkyWing started, ever so slightly annoyed.

Carmine just smiled and walked away. Jay was right. Copper had been right to try. Now it was her turn.

She reached Wisp's room in a wingbeat, but as she knocked and pushed open the door, she met Wisp, who was trying to get out.

"Wisp."

"Carmine."

"I need to tell you something," they both said in unison.

The golden-scaled SkyWing held out his wing and blushed.

The carmine-streaked Princess smiled.

As she walked inside Wisp's room, Carmine's heart beat faster. Was what liking, perhaps even loving someone felt like?

How could it *ever* feel better than flying?

Chapter 12

One year had passed.

A full moon was shining overhead.

Summer nights were always the brightest and most lively nights of the year in the Kingdom of Sky. And today, during the summer solstice, a full moon made the night that bit more special.

Carmine was wearing two golden horn adornments, and a dawn pink veil over her back and wings, which made her look like a lost cloud, according to her brothers. But she didn't really listen to them, partly because she had kind of handpicked her outfit herself, that night.

The royal family was participating at the festival tonight. Guards swarmed the place, patrolling every street and corner, enough to make the place as safe as possible for the Queen and her family.

The plaza they were at was full of SkyWings celebrating, and there were stands offering food, drinks, and lanterns everywhere.

Robin looked at Carmine. He nodded. "You look particularly dazzling today, your highness," he said with a small bow. The SkyWing Prince was wearing his golden armor and looked particularly valiant too. He was still a Captain in the army, and the SkyWing kingdom seemed to have taken a liking in him.

Carmine laughed. "Since when did you start acting like that?"

He smiled back. "Since Saffron wanted me to address her as 'your highness'," he said flatly, "I mean, I'm her brother, and she isn't a Queen."

Saffron was wearing more jewels than Carmine had ever seen, and her wings were covered in veiled adornments. Her light golden scales were barely visible under them.

"Weird," She said, smiling as she ate a small deer pastry from one of the stands. The seller bowed lowly as she walked by, and she smiled back at him.

"She's Saffron. I honestly didn't know what to expect," Robin said, shrugging, though it was still clear he was annoyed.

Suddenly, he nudged Carmine. The Prince pointed at something.

She felt the world around her disappear.

Wisp was there, looking lost, and wearing a dark metal chestpiece and tail band, which if Carmine had to guess, he had carved himself.

She walked towards him, Robin following her.
Wisp smiled as he saw them.

"You look beautiful," he said, taking her talon as he dipped his head politely. Carmine could feel herself blush.

"You look... good, too," she said, awkwardly. She didn't know how to act in these situations, but she let her heart lead her.

A moment of silence followed.

"Wisp, I wanted to introduce you to my mother," she suddenly blurted. It was too late to take it back. "If we're going to be together, and **really** together, I don't want this to be secret anymore."

He nodded slowly. "I agree, but I had actually-"

Carmine didn't let him finish. She darted off, energy rushing through her, as she tried to find her mother.

Wisp rushed after her. "Wait, Carmine-," he said, trying to keep up.

The SkyWing princess was two wingspans away from her mother, who was talking to some nobles about some aspiring Captain of the Royal Guards when she finally stopped to wait for Wisp.

"Wait, Carmine, there's something you must know before. I do love you, but-" Wisp started, just for Carmine to interrupt him again.

"Then what? This is the next logical step if we want to be official, and-"

Wisp stepped closer to her. "Carmine**, for the sky's sake,** will you marry me?"

Silence seemed to fall under Wisp's loud announcement. Carmine looked behind her to see her mother looking at her, the Queen's eyes blazing with surprise.

As she faced Wisp again, the SkyWing is was holding out a carved wooden ring, and he looked at her in a way that made her forget everyone around her.

"I had never imagined to be anything to anyone," He started, spreading down his wings, "I grew up thinking that I was born a broken heart and that I'd never, ever heal again. But the moment you came into my life, you lifted me up. You saved me. You made my life have a meaning. So now, I love you, Princess Carmine, and if they say broken hearts can never truly mend once broken, you gave me more: you gave my heart a chance to beat for something more than survival. There is no other dragon that I love more than you, so I'm asking you: do you want to make our broken hearts beat together until the end of our lives and beyond?"

Carmine felt her heart melt. She smiled lovingly and stepped closer to him, her wings held low next to his.

"**This** is an atrocity!" Queen Titian's voice made Carmine tremble in fear. Her mother marched forward, as every SkyWing moved back, forming a large circle around them.

"What do you think you're doing, Carmine? Do you want to ruin our honor? Do you think that this lowborn traitor can really fool me? I know what's right, and this is a monstrosity. Step away, now," she ordered, her eyes smoldering with fury.

She had known about Wisp all along. Carmine could tell from the

security of her voice, like if the possibility of her being wrong was nonexistent. She had let Carmine think she was free. But she had never truly evaded her mother's surveillance.

Carmine didn't move. She was paralyzed. Her mother's eye had pinned her down, and she felt her glare burn through her scales, sending shivers down her wings.

Queen Titian looked around her, seeing that now the whole SkyWing capital had their eyes on them. She lashed her tail once, and guards started to surround Wisp. He tried to talk to them, telling them to not hurt Carmine, but they were closing in on him slowly.

"No."

Titian looked at Carmine. Her daughter was looking at her, narrowing her eyes, her wings outspread.

"What did you just say?" Titian hissed, with a voice that would usually echo in Carmine's nightmares.

"I said no, Mother," Carmine replied, her voice unwavering thanks to a rush of confidence that the princess had never felt before. "I lived by your rules, by your stuck-up rules **all my life**. Those aren't SkyWing laws, and I'm not an animus or a firescales. I'm a SkyWing who fell in love. Everyone should have the freedom to fall in love. There's such beauty out there! Every place I visited, every dragon I met in this kingdom has made me realize that there's more out there than just being a good royal," she paused, "I don't **care** if I'm a princess, because I don't want you to control my life any longer."

Titian bared her fangs, taking a lumbering step towards her daughter. "You insolent dragonet! You seem to forget what SkyWings value over all! **No one** would ever want you as Queen!"

Suddenly, something almost magical happened.

A SkyWing lit their FullMoon lantern. They held it up, letting it flicker over himself like a crown.

More and more followed. After a minute, the whole plaza was

alight, SkyWings lifting their lanterns to support the princess. Robin was one of them, his smile making her feel better.

Carmine could spot three dragons who didn't raise their lanterns: Saffron, who was scoffing in the background, her father Forge, out of reverence for his wife, and her old mentor Gust, who looked shocked.

But that didn't change anything for her.

"You won't make this choice. You won't decide something that is only **our** choice," Carmine smiled as she walked towards Wisp, standing at his side.

A long moment followed.

Queen Titian saw that the kingdom wanted this, that they felt more sympathy for Carmine than for her, and dipped her head in acceptance. She had given up.

Dragons around them cheered and let go of their lanterns.

Wisp looked at Carmine, took her talon, and slipped the ring on her claw. They smiled as they held on to each other in a hug.

That would have been a perfect night. If it hadn't been for her mother who, while giving their marriage her approval by touching Carmine's head with her own, hissed something in her ear.

"You just made a huge mistake. I'll ***never*** leave this kingdom in your talons," the Queen hissed.

And then, she was gone.

Chapter 13

Three years later...

Carmine's ears flicked as she heard noises coming from the entrance.

She loved the royal library. It made her feel safe, almost shielded from the world under those bookshelves of knowledge. Any interruption of that tranquility made her jump.

Her life had given her a lot of opportunities during the last years.

After Academy, she had to take a liking in history and justice administration.

King Forge had encouraged her to pursue her dream, and after moons of training under the finest administrators, she had been nominated Councilor of Law in the SkyWing Palace, which was a title she held with pride.

She had even attended Prince Robin's promotion to general in the SkyWing army, which she had found surprising, in a good way of course. But if you would have asked Carmine five years go, 'general' would have been the least likely occupation for the wiry Prince.

So now, her role was to judge dragons during a trial, after listening (or giving) a speech about the SkyWing's innocence or guilt.

This also meant that she had to study all of that dragon's history and ties, which meant that she spent a lot of time in the royal library.

More specifically in the archives.

Today, she was supposed to judge a SkyWing named Crevice for theft, but her mind was sidetracked.

She had found a very interesting chart file on a SkyWing with a

very interesting history... or none at all, apparently.

Fitting her reading glasses on, she had a look at the frail scroll, which had turned yellow over time.

Name: *Alight*
Gender: *Male*

General Description:
Light orange scales, russet speckled wings. Pale hazel eyes.

History
History Destroyed

Notable ties
History Destroyed

Notes
The existentance of this dragon is to be forgotten. Law officials who find this scroll are to consider this information as extremely confidential.

Long live the Kingdom **of** *Sky*

Carmine had found that scroll immensely intriguing. She had access to all the knowledge of the kingdom. She knew all the laws of the kingdom by heart. She was also the keeper of a lot of secrets now.

Then how come she had never seen a SkyWing chart file like this before? Even the worst criminal wasn't forgotten... what was so different about Alight?

An idea arose in her head. *"Could he be a firescales? Or maybe even an animus?"* the idea seemed more and more plausible the more she thought into it. But then she finally realized that couldn't be the case, "*No... they would have killed him without any record if that was the case."*

It was heartless. Carmine thought about it, deeply, instead of studying that afternoon's case. How could anyone do that? Destroying the history and ties of a SkyWing seemed insane... and barbaric. What had that dragon done to be forgotten by his whole

tribe?

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. It didn't shake her from her thoughts. She only concentrated once the SkyWing took the scroll from her talons.

"What are you reading?" Wisp asked looking at the scroll. Carmine quickly snatched it from his talons.

"It's confidential," she retorted simply.

"Even to your husband?" He asked as he sat next to her.

Carmine smiled, rolling the scroll up, and tying it closed with a black ribbon, the one the officers used for confidential information. "Yes. Sorry, it's my duty." She said, brushing his wing as she stood up, ready to leave.

"Ah. I understand," Wisp said, pretending to not know. He stood up and walked next to her as they left the library.

They walked quietly for a bit.

Wisp had become taller and more muscular ever since he had been accepted into the Academy Arts. To others, it wouldn't have made sense, as Arts didn't really require much strength, to be honest. But Carmine knew that it was thanks to Robin's hard work in helping him learn to fight, and the mandatory period of time they had both spent in the army, training next to the newly recruited soldiers.

Carmine herself had become stronger and faster, and she could often hold down Robin for a few seconds, though thanks to his bigger size and strength, he would always throw her off easily.

She smiled as he met her eyes. Wisp's eyes sparkled under the daylight that was flooding through the windows, making the amethysts over his eyes shine too.

"You're really going to court today? Yesterday evening was pretty tiring," Wisp said kindly. From the look on his scales, Carmine guessed that he had woken up only a one or two hours earlier.

"No, not really. Though Jay and Copper did seem pretty exhausted at the end of it," Carmine said, shaking her head.

"But they were obviously happy. Their wedding was honestly amazing. Kind of makes me regret not having one myself," Wisp said, shrugging.

Carmine remembered that. Wisp was so excited about having a wedding after the got engaged. But the princess had shot down the idea with disgust. She hated parties. And even more, she hated parties where she was the main focus. It had disappointed Wisp, but the two got married in a quiet hall with only a few family members and friends, Robin, Forge, Copper, and Jay being some of them. Titian had excused herself, but Carmine had heard the Queen whisper that her daughter "wasn't as important as she thought," to a closer advisor.

"I'm just glad we get to be together now. I think that's all that matters," Carmine replied softly, and with a small smile, they walked into the tight and torch-lit corridor that led to the auditorium.

The whole place was filled already. The audience was sat in an amphitheater-like structure at each side. Wisp smiled back at Carmine before sitting in the rows too.

The SkyWing defendant was at the center of the auditorium, with two guards at his sides.

Carmine walked around them to take her place at the center of the highest stage, behind her desk. At her side, Queen Titian was sitting majestically, not giving her a single glance as she walked up, continuing to talk quietly to Commander Crest, the Captain of the Royal Guards.

Princess Carmine spread her wings for silence. The whole auditorium became silent.

"Today," the princess started, her voice loud but clear "We'll be judging the case of Crevice of the SkyWing, accused of theft and repeated lying to authorities when confronted with the fact. As

tradition calls, the defendant will get five minutes to talk before the case is handed to the defense and prosecution. May the Sky aid your words, and you may now speak," Carmine said, giving the floor to the wiry-looking defendant.

Crevice raised his head. "Honorable jury, kind audience, and merciful Queen," he bowed his head as he recited the mandatory words to begin any speech, "I would like to begin by saying the one reason why I am not guilty and should-"

FLASH.

As fireball plummeted through the high glass dome of the auditorium. It sent flaming shards of glass raining down of the dragons as the whole place burst to bright red flames.

Panic erupted.

All the dragons tried to crowd outside the entrance tunnel. A few tried escaping by flying upwards. Carmine saw a lot of SkyWing screaming for help as the fire engulfed them, or they were squashed by flaming wood or stone blocks.

Fear made Carmine shake under her scales. She roared for dragons to stop using the tunnel, but she wasn't fast enough, as at least two SkyWings got crushed as it collapsed over them.

Smoke was starting to well up, invading the princess's lungs as she coughed it out, as she took off, frantically looking for cover.

But a loud CRACK made Carmine turn around. A wooden column had caught fire and was broken down. The fire cast light around the shadow of the column as it plummeted down.

And fear crept into her eyes before Carmine shut them, spreading her wings, as if she could hold up the world of pain she was about to feel.

Chapter 14

Since her eyes were closed, all Carmine could feel was the heat of the flaming column come closer and closer as it fell over her.

How could she survive? Running away wasn't an option, the ceiling was collapsing with unbearable heat.

So she waited, eyed closed, surrendered... she even managed to smile as she thought that she had exactly the life she had wished for, at that moment.

But the column didn't fall. The fire never hit her.

Carmine opened an eye to immediately gasp, a shocked expression taking over her face.

Wisp was flying over her, holding the column up until he managed to push it out of the way.

But that wasn't what made Carmine's heart clutch,

His scales were **on fire.** His wings were like two embers, beating as the SkyWing kept himself in the air.

Wisp was going to burn to death.

Carmine met his eyes and already felt her heart break as she thought that it would be the last time she ever saw Wisp alive.

...
..
.

But Wisp wasn't dead.

Shaking his head, the flaming SkyWing made his way to Carmine, who instinctively tried to move away from the heat.

Seeing this, he quickly grasped the princess's talon, and with a decisive pull, Wisp dragged outside the flaming auditorium, shielding her from any falling pieces of flaming debris.

They flew low and steadily until they reached the Diamond Spray River. It didn't take them long, but Wisp was still on fire when they reached the rushing waters of the river.

Leaving her talon, Wisp plunged underwater and remerged seconds after. His scales were quenched by the water and had returned to normal.

Carmine looked at him for a long moment.

"Wisp was on fire and survived." She thought slowly.

The weight of that thought hit her like an avalanche a few seconds later.

"*Wisp was **on fire** and **SURVIVED!**"*

Carmine took a step away from him. She didn't know what had happened. She didn't even know if she knew who Wisp really was anymore.

Wisp took a step towards her. "I can explain," he said, his voice cracking.

"You better be able to, Wisp," Carmine said with a snarl, her voice emotional.

"I didn't want you to find out like this. I didn't want you to find out at all - but I couldn't keep lying to you... I couldn't live normally if you didn't know..." Wisp said straightening himself.

"What are you, really? What did you hide from me... from everyone? Are you a firescales?" Carmine asked with an accusatory voice.

"No. I'm not constantly of fire, and you can obviously tell that-" he started, but the princess didn't let him finish.

"That's obvious but I can't rule anything out if I-" she gasped, realizing something, "Wisp... you're not an animus, are you? Please tell me you're not."

Wisp shook his head, taking another step towards her. "I'm nothing of the sort," he breathed slowly and deeply, "Carmine, I'm an **alight**."

"A what?" She said, narrowing her eyes as she tried to understand.

"An **alight**. We're not as known or powerful at firescales or animi, but we are something completely different," he sat next to Carmine, looking down at you and then to his talons again.

Wisp blinked slowly, the stared explaining. "Alights are born with an abnormal mutation in their mouth and throat. It's a genetic mutation that is passed down often from generation to generation. Usually, it's something unimportant and uninteresting. But Alights are the minority that has a mutation which completely blocks out their ability to breathe fire. The fire doesn't disappear, it reverts to our blood, wings, scales... and makes us completely impervious to fire but also incredibly flammable. That's why I can catch fire and not burn... that's why I can hide it but not control it."

Carmine looked at him. Her initial rage had turned to disbelief. Her talon was shaking as she held his. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you. I could have been careful-"

"But treating someone carefully will never make you treat them normally. I don't need anyone to know. You least of all," Wisp said quietly, giving her a meaningful glance.

"Because I'm the Councilor of Law, and the SkyWings decided long ago to ban dragons like you," Carmine breathed silently.

"The law never says kill. All powered SkyWings come to know that before they are sentenced to death. They think they can escape their fate because technically it's not a law. But I know that belief can push you to do the most wrecked things... and I tied myself to the enemy when I fell in love with you," Wisp said.

He looked her straight in the eye, his pale hazel eyes steady, "Carmine, please tell me you can see that too."

A long moment passed. The river was rushing in the background like it was waiting for an answer too.

"I promised to be by your side, always. I promised to protect you. And that's exactly what I plan on doing," Carmine said, looking back at him, holding his talon tightly.

They lifted off silently, making their way back to the palace.

A chain of SkyWings had formed from the burning auditorium to the river. Dragons were passing each other buckets of water to them spill them over the fire in an attempt to make it die out. The princess thought she could spot Eagle, a promising young SkyWing with them too.

Wisp gave Carmine a small smile before flying off to join the line, posting himself near the river, and quickly pitching in with the dragons helping to pass buckets of water along.

The SkyWing princess flew back to the palace with a shaken mind.

Wisp had lied to her. He had good reasons behind it, reasons that could have condemned him to a painful death. But no matter what, she still felt... betrayed.

She landed in the central courtyard, where she saw Saffron giving orders to the guards around her. All the dragons that had escaped the fire were either panicking as they waited there or, if injured, being carried to the nearest hospitals.

Carmine was none of those. She was dead silent but not wounded. Not externally, at least.

Wisp had lied to her. That didn't change. He had influenced her life without telling her his full story... she had been fooled by him, just like she had once been fooled by Mother's 'perfect SkyWing' rules.

For a short moment, she could see more similarities than differences between Wisp and Titian.

Someone shook her from her brooding thoughts. A young guard, who was still panting as he had run to the edge of the kingdom, was trying to get her attention.

Carmine realized that she had been digging a hole in the ground with her talons, and immediately stopped. "Yes?" She snapped, flatly.

"Excuse me, your majesty. Queen Titian asked if she could see you. Right away, actually," he said, all in one breath.

Carmine narrowed her eyes as she lashed her tail. Her mother was the last dragon she wanted to see at this moment. "Tell her that she'll need to wait," she retorted.

The guard looked down at his talons, shaking his head. "Your majesty..."

He paused, then continued.

"She doesn't have much time left."

Chapter 15

Carmine's talons were moving of their own will.

Soon, the princess was running faster than she ever had.

And for *what*?

To stand by her mother's bed, and hear the last, hateful words of the SkyWing Queen?

Titian hated Carmine, it was obvious. Now she was dying, and the princess figured that her only daughter, which she also hated, would be the last dragon that she would want to see.

It was obvious... but Carmine still had mixed feelings towards her. A part of her still saw her as family, as the dragon that taught her how to walk and that laughed at her first, broken words. And that part of her was making the princess run towards her dying mother's room.

-/-

Queen Titian's room was larger than hers, with more windows and a more spacious bed. King Forge didn't share it with her, and Carmine had no idea of where her father actually slept, but she guessed it was somewhere in the Queen's quarters.

But at that moment, the King wasn't with his wife.

Titian was laying in bed, alone, if it wasn't for the two medics by her side, who moving quickly with swift talons.

The Queen's hacking coughing made Carmine falter for a second before walking to her mother's bedside.

While the bedsheets covered most of her body and her wings, the princess could still see the burn marks across the Queen's neck. Part of it was so burned it was impossible to see her scales.

The Queen of the SkyWings raised her head slowly and hissed something under her breath. The medics must have heard the message because they bowed deeply and walked outside the room, their heads held low as a sign of respect and grieving.

Carmine kneeled down, sitting at the bedside of her mother, who's shallow breath made her close her eyes in pain.

"You couldn't wait for this moment to come, huh?" She said with a cracking voice, "your hatred for me has finally culminated."

Carmine looked at her with pain in her eyes. But she didn't say a word.

Queen Titian smiled crookedly. "The moment you hatched, the world seemed to stop. You were perfect, and so was that moment. I hung on to that perfect moment every time life got ugly," she coughed, her breathing becoming dryer. "You were **perfect**, Carmine. But I didn't want to think of what you could become. What you are now... you're a rebel. I-," she coughed again, "I can't believe that this is what you... became."

Carmine looked at her mother but didn't say a thing. She shook her wings, biting back the pain that those words inflicted on her.

"But... some-," she coughed again, her whole body shaking, "some, some part of me is proud. You're a-a...," she stopped for a second.

"A warrior. You're a warrior, Carmine," she said with a strong voice, despite her wounds, "and that would make any mother proud."

For a moment, Carmine didn't believe those words. For a moment, she waited for her mother to add a 'but I hate you anyway'.

That sentence never arrived.

And the princess spent a few moments basking in her mother's praise.

CREEK

The door to the Queen's room opened.

Carmine expected her father or her brother to walk in... perhaps even a close advisor.

But instead, an armored SkyWing marched inside with steady steps. Carmine recognized the armor to be one of the Royal Guards.

She took her helmet off. Carmine seemed to remember those deep red eyes... she had seen this dragon before.

The Royal Guard bowed respectfully. "Your majesty... I could say that I am deeply grieving, but that's not what you need to hear right now your highness. Commander Crest is dead, he burned to death trying to save some escaping SkyWings."

Carmine was surprised with the confidence that the SkyWing used to address her Queen. Anyhow, Titian smiled and nodded.

"He-he died a hero," she croaked before coughing again, "such a rockhead. That means... congratulations, Lance. You're the new Captain of the Royal Guards."

Lance

Lance

Lance

That name rang in her head a few times. She didn't hear the part of the conversation that followed.

She just saw Lance, all those years back, trying to kill Wisp without a shred of remorse.

"Carmine..."

Titian's voice came out as a pain-struck whisper, and that shook the princess from her haunting thoughts.

"Mother," Carmine said, taking her mother's talon as the Queen's breathing became faster and shallower.

Her time was running out.

"According to law..." the Queen started, but Carmine shook her talon.

"This isn't the time to quote laws, Mother," she said, sadness starting to wet her eyes.

"ACCORDING to law," she started again, looking at Carmine sideways, "when I die, you're supposed to honor me as your ancestor, follow in my footsteps and take my crown and all that comes with it. When I die, you would become the next SkyWing Queen."

Carmine was caught, once again, off-guard.

"Me? Queen?" she asked herself, thunderstruck.

Her mother pressed on. Carmine heard her getting quieter and quieter, but still not willing to give up.

"But, I said 'would'. Law says yo-you would become queen after my death. But I still have one last minute to make one last change," she coughed again, and Carmine knew she was now fighting for air. She held her mother's talon harder.

"You're many things, Carmine. But not a Queen. You're never going to be a Queen," she said as quickly as she could before coughing once more, even more harshly than before.

Lance stepped closer. Carmine was starting to understand what was about to happen.

She breathed quickly, her eyes closed, then gritted her teeth, trying to hang on, unsuccessfully.

"You're *never* going to lead this tribe. The next SkyWing Queen... will be Saffron."

A silent moment passed.

And then, Queen Titian of the SkyWings was gone.

Chapter 16

A princess, bowing deeply as the previous SkyWing King placed a golden crown over her head.
-
The whole kingdom cheering with glee.
-
A future of glory awaiting the new SkyWing Queen.

...

That's how Carmine had imagined it.

Ever since she was a dragonet, she'd always imagined that scene in the same exact way.

But now... she was the one watching, cheering with supposed and fake glee as the golden crown was lowered by King Forge over Princess Saffron's head.

Carmine fiddled with a her talons, and stole a sideways glance at Wisp, who was sitting next to her.

Her whole life, she'd been told the same things: Think royal. Act royal. Be royal.

She had been promised a role of power in her tribe. She had grown up thinking that was her place in the world.

Carmine looked away from Wisp, her mind shattered.

In her dying breaths, Queen Titian had managed to steal the one thing Carmine had always taken for granted:

...her power.

-/-

"This is madness!" The Councilor of Resources bellowed with anger.

The whole Council muttered under their breaths, but it all died down when Queen Saffron shook her wings for attention.

"The SeaWings have taken more and more liberties in the past months. Soon, they'll be claiming the coast villages as their own, and we can't let them do it. So..." she trailed off, glaring at the Councilor of Resources, who lowered his head, "we can either stand here, waiting for something to happen, or crush their plans before they are even put into action."

General Peak looked uneasy. Copper's father was now growing older and frailer, and his troubled gaze just hinted at the fact that he was unsure of his chances of surviving another war.

"Your Majesty, I'm confident you realize the SeaWings will always have the advantage if we fight them in their territory. We can't follow them underwater, and they have shown to use that to win battles more than once," the General said, composing his face to look more dignified.

The Queen smiled maliciously. "Perhaps you're too scared to fight a war, Peak, but I'm sure you'd find that a few of your fellows would take your place in the blink of an eye if offered to," she said.

The threat worked, and the old SkyWing general looked down with defeat.

Seeing that no one wanted to say anything more, Queen Saffron took the floor again.

"Dear councilors. You seem to have forgotten one important particularity of this conversation. We are *SkyWings.* We never back down from the chance to prove ourselves. Our soldiers would be proud to die in battle for their kingdom. And the SeaWings have nothing against us," she paused, letting that settle in. "I'll tell you one thing. Let us attack the SeaWings. Let them cower under the cover of the waves, and then, let us boil the sea with our fire and burn the parasites out of their shell."

The idea left a few dragons baffled. Mostly because it was insane, but also because of the fear that Saffron might actually take it

seriously.

"Council dismissed," the SkyWing Queen declared, and one by one, the councilors left with their heads lowered.

During all this time, Carmine hadn't said a word. She had been feeling nauseous for the past days, but also because she didn't know what to say.

She was the Councilor of Law, and in the six months in which Saffron had been Queen, she didn't have the chance to ever speak up. The Queen would bend every rule in existence to get what she wanted. General Robin, her *brother*, had been demoted to Major for 'annoying her'. Forge had been exiled from the palace because he 'reminded her majesty of her deceased aunt', and Carmine had barely been able to see her father ever since.

But despite all of this, the princess had purposely avoided one dragon: Wisp.

She couldn't bare to look at him. They had fought the day of Saffron's coronation. It was the day that she told him that Lance was now Captain of the Royal guards and had been shattered by fear ever since. Apparently, the experience had left Wisp traumatized and he had become defensive about everything.

Carmine walked away from the Council room quietly, avoiding to look at Queen Saffron or her now 'most trusted advisor', Captain Lance. The princess hypothesized that the idea of waging war on the SeaWings had come from the latter SkyWing rather than the volatile Queen.

Lance watched her leave, but Carmine was quick enough to look away before meeting her eyes. She had been defeated by *her* too and she was the dragon that had tried to kill Wisp all those years ago.

As she strolled down the hallways, Carmine felt something new; She felt **alone**. Ever since she had fought with Wisp, they had barely talked. Now her Kingdom might even be heading into war and she had no idea what that would mean for the SkyWings. Maybe she'd

even lose the few friends that remained to a war that shouldn't be fought to start with.

That's when she realized that, maybe, just maybe, she wasn't *completely* alone.

The SkyWing princess took a spiral of stairs and turned down a few corridors before finding the room she was looking for.

Six months ago, Carmine had fought with Wisp about her now nonexistent powers. He had told her that it didn't matter. It didn't change who she was. Carmine had scoffed, told him that he had no right to say so when he was about as defined by his power as she was. The conversation had degenerated from that point onwards.

But one last important thing was said, just before the SkyWing princess stormed out of the conversation.

Carmine entered the room. *There* was the dragon that made her feel hopeful for her future, hopeful for her marriage. She spied a red-shelled egg laying peacefully in the SkyWing hatchery. Carmine walked towards it and held it in her talons, closing her eyes as she let her sadness disappear.

Six months ago, Carmine had broken the news to Wisp that she was with egg.

"Greetings, little one," Carmine whispered to the egg, "your mother is here. Your mother is right here."

She breathed as she heard footsteps approaching the hatchery, and held the egg even tighter.

"And everything will be just fine."

Chapter 17

Carmine was unpleasantly surprised when she saw that the footsteps had belonged to Lance. The SkyWing stopped at the doorway but walked up to her as the princess gently placed her egg back on its nest.

"Greetings, your Majesty," she said with a low voice.

Carmine wanted to reply, but she couldn't bring herself to do so.

"Your egg seems to be perfectly healthy," Lance said with a half-smile, though it didn't seem like she cared at all.

"And so will be my dragonet," she said, Carmine said, spreading a wing over it as if to protect the egg.

Lance looked unimpressed. She narrowed her eyes. "If only your husband could be as healthy. But he was born broken, wasn't he?"

Carmine's heart clutched in fear. Some part of her mind told her that Lance knew about Wisp's secret. Her eyes darted away from the SkyWing's, unable to hold her penetrating gaze.

"He was just a little startled ever since the fire in the auditorium. He's going to be fine," she said trying to brush it off. She stood up and took one step towards the door.

"Carmine," Lance said menacingly. The princess stopped in her tracks. She turned around and forced herself to look at the Captain of the Royal Guards.

"Your eyes betray you. You know something about Alights, don't you? You seem to have done your research," she said with a malicious smile.

"What do you want, Lance?" Carmine asked, narrowing her own eyes.

Lance lashed her tail. "You know nothing, do you?" She laughed at her own question. "Very well then, princess. Let me enlighten you."

She started walking towards Carmine as she spoke, "My mother, Flare, and Wisp's father, Sulfur, knew each other. They were as close as siblings, and perhaps even closer than that."

She paused, chuckled, then continued. "I was born from their relationship before Sulfur decided to marry a younger, richer, and more attractive SkyWing: Sizzle. They prospered together, while my mother was left alone."

Lance lashed her tail to then look away from her, turning towards one of the mosaic windows that lit the hatchery, while her voice became dangerously dark. "My mother never broke a single rule of this moon-forsaken kingdom, but Wisp's father did. Sulfur lost everything after his wife died. So he decided to betray his tribe to save his family. He was caught by the guards before he could commit further treachery. Your mother would have had him executed... but Sulfur told her about my mother, trying to shift the blame on her. Flare was taken to court, and Queen Titian decided she was guilty of a crime she hadn't committed. Wisp was alive at that time, and he didn't do anything against it. He could have said the truth, but he didn't. Flare and Sulfur were **both** executed for treachery."

Carmine tried to make sense of all the information that was being thrown at her. Her tail was curled in a spiral, a sign that she waited for Lance to continue.

After a few long moments, she did, looking at the SkyWing princess.

"I was alone," she said, half-laughing. That laugh. It was unsettling. It sounded broken, insane... unhinged.

"I had nothing left, except for my anger. Anger against Titian and anything that had to do with royalty. But mostly, against my half-brother: Wisp," she continued, her voice sharp.

Carmine could barely keep her wings from shaking. This was so much.

"My mother executed an innocent dragon and Wisp's father. And Wisp doesn't know that Lance is his half-sister... Lance. Wisp. Related. How did this ever happen?" she thought, trying to process.

"When I became a guard, I sneaked my way inside the Royal archives. I stole any scroll that had to do with Wisp's history. I wanted revenge, and I needed to find out if there was any way I could expose Wisp. Luckily, his mother, Sizzle, had a few secrets no else ever knew about her. She was an alight. And not just *any* alight. She was **Alight's** niece," Lance continued, smirking.

Carmine remember that dragon. The day the auditorium had caught on fire, she had found his scroll. His history had been erased, and it had seemed like his tribe wanted to forget him. Apparently that had been true.

"Alight's family was killed when they discovered his power, so the gene could not be passed along," Lance chucked again, smirking, "Your mother executed over twenty innocent dragons that day, not caring of their age. She was scared of Alights, and wanted them all dead. I shouldn't have been surprised... she always was a bloodthirsty maniac."

Carmine felt short of breath. Her mother had really killed innocent SkyWings? Even SkyWings that weren't alights, just because she was scared?

"Sizzle escaped her. She lived, and had Wisp."

Lance's statement awoke her from her spiral of dark thoughts.

"So you found out that Wisp might be an alight by tracing back his lineage," Carmine said, looking at Lance, who's eyes were flickering with maliciousness.

"Exactly. But see, Sizzle died, so I had no way to prove that Wisp was her son... except one." She paused, clicking her front teeth in a menacing way. "I came up with a way to expose him. I was going to get my revenge... and it was going to be on fire."

"Fire"

The dusk light rippled down on Lance's face, making it shine red as if covered with blood.

Carmine clutched the stone floor with her talon. She felt her wings tremble once as the same cold, slithering feeling that she had first felt when she met Lance all those years ago traveled down her spine.

But while her world was brought crashing down, and her thoughts were spiraling wildly, Carmine held Lance's gaze.

She didn't blink. She didn't falter. She didn't fall back.

And as she talked, she felt something new burn inside her. She had felt sadness, emptiness, and despair before. But now she was feeling courage... or perhaps just pure anger.

"You killed my mother," the Princess breathed, from behind her clenched teeth.

"I wasn't targeting her. When I set fire to the auditorium, I aimed at the Left Wing, where Wisp was sitting. Too bad a few dragons had to die during this experiment," she chuckled, lashing her tail as she smiled murderously, "But Queen Titian... her death was just an added bonus."

"You're a traitorous serpent!" Carmine snarled, widening her stance.

"She isn't who I thought she was. I used to think that she was violent, yes, but loyal to her tribe. Now I know she's not loyal. She's dangerous."

"I'm nothing of the sort," Lance retorted, taking a few steps toward the princess.

Carmine didn't look away from her, and soon enough, they were just half a wingspan away from each other.

"You hid Wisp's powers from your tribe. You lied to your Queen about it. You're anything but loyal, dear Councilor of Law," Lance sneered.

Carmine flinched but quickly replied. "What are you going to do

now? You just told me you were the one responsible for killing my mother. Your killing spree will be over now that I have this information. Saffron might like you, but she will believe my word over yours."

"I hope. I really, really hope so," her thoughts echoed.

Lance smiled, her sharp fangs protruding from her jaws. "Yes, but you just told me what I needed to know. Wisp is alight. I didn't see it myself the day the auditorium caught fire, but I heard it from you today."

Carmine was shaken. Her heart was pounding. She had just told Lance the information she needed.

"You're not going to hurt him. Not again," the SkyWing princess hissed, "not if I can help it."

Lance blinked slowly, her pupil constricting into her fury-shot eyes.

"While seeing you trying to stand in my way would be humorous, I don't plan on killing Wisp anymore. I've seen that that's not the right thing to do," Lance said taking one step closer.

She bent down to Carmine's head, towards her ear. Lance's cold breath made her shiver.

"You taught me to be smarter, princess," the SkyWing whispered.

The captain of the royal guards walked past her, towards one of the two curtains that lined the doorway. Behind it was her spear, wickedly sharp and made of what seemed to be titanium.

"So why should I just kill him when I have the means to get rid of you both?" She snarled and, flaring her wings, she took off at a startling speed.

"No!" Carmine's heart was racing, but her talons were even faster. She raced after Lance, soon spreading her wings to catch up to her.

"She can't do this... she can't do this again. I lost mother to her fire... but I can't lose Wisp to the claws of his own blood. I can't lose him too."

Chapter 18

Luckily for Carmine, she knew exactly where Wisp would be at this time, unlike Lance.

She raced to the courtyard, where she found him talking to Eagle. He was smiling.

Eagle was one of the brightest minds of the kingdom. The red-scaled SkyWing looked intimidating and cold at first, but he was deeply thoughtful and sensible. Carmine had taken a liking to him and since he was still in late dragonethood, she had decided to take him in and mentor him on the subject he loved most: public relations and debate.

Eagle had respect for Wisp, but Carmine had never seen them talk about anything, ever. Today it seemed like they had so much to say to one another... and they were laughing too.

The princess barged into their conversation, her pounding heart still hammering in her ears.

"You need to come," Carmine said, looking at Wisp, while the latter and Eagle gazed back at her, concerned.

"Everything alright, Your Excellence?" Eagle asked, using the same word he always used to address her.

"You need to come. Now!" Carmine repeated, her voice now pleading as she took Wisp's talon in her own.

Her husband looked shaken at first, but he regained his calm soon enough. He excused himself with a dip of his head, and he let Carmine lead him away.

The SkyWing princess was trying not to break down. She thought of where they could hide to make sure Lance couldn't find them and after a few seconds of thinking, it became clear that hiding

anywhere in the palace would be dangerous.

Her home wasn't a safe place anymore.

So, the two SkyWings spread their wings and flew. They flew for a while, completely silent until they reached the Diamond Spray river, where they landed on a rock ledge that looked over the kingdom, its forests and mountains. The SkyWing capital was visible and easily recognizable. The view of the horizon would have taken Carmine's breath away if she hadn't already been so short of breath from all the things Lance had told her.

"Carmine," Wisp said, placing his talon on her shoulders as she breathed heavily, in shock, "talk to me. I'll listen. I promised that I would always take half of your pain no matter what and I am here now, for you."

Carmine looked up at him. She closed her eyes, trying to bite back all the pain, and then spoke. She told him about Lance, about his true identity and her threat. Wisp only asked her to stop talking when he found out that he was related to Lance. If the princess had to guess, he was probably shocked too by the revelation that the one dragon who wanted him dead was the only blood relative he had left.

Once Carmine stopped talking, they both were silent for a second. The evening breeze buffeted their wings as the sky started to paint itself with red streaks of sunset.

"There's only one solution to this," Wisp said, breaking the silence and taking Carmine's talon in his own.

Carmine had expected him to say the impossible. She thought that he would say that they could fight Lance, or that they could change the law that banned 'different' SkyWings. She thought that they could have really done the impossible, together.

After a moment that seemed to last forever, he announced, "I need to disappear."

"What?!" Carmine asked, shocked by Wisp's proposition, "don't joke.

We don't have time for this."

"I'm completely serious," Wisp assured her, lowering his head. "If I disappear, no one will try looking for me. As long as I leave the SkyWing kingdom, then I will be safe. I can live on one of southern islands, under the Rainforest. I will be safe there, but I'm not safe here anymore. I need to leave, now."

Carmine blinked a few times, trying to process this. She tried finding a flaw in his argument, but there was none. It made sense. If Wisp left, no one would look for him, and the SkyWing kingdom would just forget him or consider him a traitor, especially if Lance exposed him to be an Alight.

But Carmine wasn't going to agree to the plan just yet. "If you leave, I leave. I won't let you go alone. I dragged you into this mess by telling Lance, even if not on purpose. If you leave the SkyWing Kingdom... then I'll leave it too."

Wisp closed his eyes. He started laughing. Firstly, it was just a quiet chuckle, but then it morphed into a loud, nervous laugh.

"You can't leave, Carmine."

The princess tilted her head and looked at him, surprised. "What are you talking about?"

"You can't leave. You're a princess-," he stared, but she didn't let him finish.

"I don't care. Right now, I need you to be safe. I need you, Wisp. This kingdom will survive, with or without me," she said, holding his other talon and looking at him, softly.

"You can't say that anymore," Wisp said, sounding conflicted.

"Wisp, stop."

"You know as well as I do that Saffron wants to wage war on the SeaWings. Everyone in the kingdom knows. But we don't need a war. We don't **want** a war," he stopped, biting his lip before continuing, "but you can stop this. You can still stop this. This

kingdom needs you, Carmine. More dragons need you to stay. If Saffron declares war on the SeaWings-,"

Carmine flared her wings, annoyed. "I don't care about Saffron! I don't care about anyone anymore. I **need** you, Wisp! I care about you and-."

"SkyWings will die, Carmine! Thousands of SkyWings will die. You need to care, because you can save them! You need to care, because you're a princess. You were born to protect your kingdom. Please tell me you can see that," Wisp retorted, trying his best not to raise his voice.

"I..." Carmine started, realizing what he was trying to say. His eyes felt sore, and she swallowed, trying to bite back the feelings that were welling up. "I don't want to leave you... I promised that I would always be by your side."

Wisp walked closer to her, and held her talons. "Our powers are both things we didn't choose to be born with. But you can still do good with yours, and I will try to find a way to use mine for good too... just not here," he paused, and met her gaze, "You're royalty, Carmine. Your power is much stronger than mine, and you don't have to be afraid of it," he closed his eyes, smiling, "I never, ever was."

Carmine took a step back and looked down, closing her eyes, trying desperately not to give up to what was, unforgivably, the truth.

A horn sounded in the distance. Even with her eyes closed, Carmine knew what it meant: the guards were coming.

That's when she heard Wisp inhaling sharply, and raised her head to look at him.

Blood was trailing down the right side of his face, from above his eyes: he had plucked out the embedded amethysts. Carmine didn't dare to think how painful that must have been. She was speechless.

"What... why?" She asked, as he handed her the gemstones, still covered in blood.

Wisp's face was half contorted in pain. He tried smiling, "you can frame my death with these. They'll believe you if they see my gemstones, as they all know you wouldn't be able to carry my body back. You can find a way Carmine. I don't need these amethysts to feel like I belong here. I will always belong here, and I'll always be here, right by your side. I love you too much to let go."

Tears started to cloud Carmine's eyes as she hugged him tightly, wrapping her wings around him.

"Please stay safe," She croaked, though the overwhelming despair that was taking over her, "and Wisp..." she added, looking into his eyes softly, "come back when this is all over. We will fix this... together."

He held her close before letting her go.

"Broken hearts find a way to beat," Wisp said, smiling sadly, then taking off.

Carmine could just stand there, watching him fly away, melting into the carmine streaks of the sunset.

She lowered her head, and then took off in the opposite direction.

Her power was just beginning to settle in.

-/-

Lance and Saffron marched towards Carmine as she entered the main courtyard.

The guards, diplomats and nobles stopped to look at her. The princess even saw Forge, watching from one of the ledges of the walls.

"Princess Carmine," Queen Saffron hissed, as the SkyWing approached her.

Carmine looked at her straight in the eye, and dropped the blood-stained amethysts at her feet.

She gave one glare at Lance, who looked baffled.

"I've come this far, and I'm still only defined by my blood. But... maybe... I don't have to fight it. I just need to fight with my claws for something greater, something brighter. For the SkyWings. For Robin. For Forge. For my mother's memory. For... Wisp. And, along the way, ***for myself*** *. I'm done fighting against myself."*

Carmine flared her wings, and stood tall.

"Queen Saffron, I challenge you for the SkyWing throne."

Epilogue

[image]

The morning sky was painted with streaks of blue, and tinged with long, drifting clouds.

Queen Carmine looked out from the ledge, towards her kingdom.

She came to this spot often, it remind her of when she, Robin and Wisp used to spend afternoon together, years ago.

The SkyWing monarch sighed. Some many things had changed in the last twenty years...

Robin had become, once again, General and had married too. Carmine found Brand to be kind enough for Robin, but also too airheaded to be a soldier. Luckily, she was a treasurer instead.

Forge had moved back into the palace, and was now working on a series of mathematical studies. The old King had kept him smarts even though he was now an elder, and Carmine always appreciated his input in the decisions she made.

As for Lance... she had died, about a year ago, thanks to an avalanche which had also wiped away a part of Broken Berm. The Queen had her buried, and then tried to move on quickly, as if to cancel her memory.

Carmine had also worked on Broken Berm. She had wanted to relocated the families away from that haunted place, but after that disaster had happened many dragons had the wish to abandon the Berm. Carmine also made sure that the ones who stayed could now afford a decent life.

Twenty years had passed, and Carmine had never seen Wisp ever again. She was still waiting for him to return. She still missed him. And every time she heard of deranged SkyWings in the desert or runaway dragons from the northern isles, she would wish has hard

as she could for one of them to be Wisp.

But she had kept her promise. The SkyWing Queen had prevented the war with the SeaWings. But unfortunately, after years of peace, problems were arising again.

Luckily, unlike Saffron, Carmine had been the Councilor of Law, and knew a more peaceful way to deal with these problems.

"We're ready to leave," a voice announced behind Carmine.

She turned around to greet the SkyWing. Her scales were hibiscus red, and her wings were the same color as her mother's, just without the streaks of red at their tips. But her smile... it was exactly like her father's.

Wisp had always liked the name Sunset. He thought it sounded powerful. Carmine would have preferred a more combative name, but when he had left, she hadn't felt strong enough to deny him this.

Princess Sunset dipped his head. "Eagle is ready, Mother. He said we will be there by midday if we leave now."

Queen Carmine nodded. She loved her daughter. Everyone in the kingdom knew that the SkyWing Queen would do anything for her daughter, and Sunset lived a happy, wholesome life. Robin thought that she wasn't particularly strong for a SkyWing, but Carmine didn't care. She had his father's mind and heart, and her love for diplomacy. Just like she had trained Eagle, who was now the Royal Foreign Secretary, Sunset was training to become an envoy, and Eagle had become her mentor.

"I think Eagle is right. You will stay in the SeaWing kingdom for two days, and then you can return here," Carmine said with a calm tone, "Remember, we want them to surrender the sea side villages. They belong to us and-."

"We want them back before they're threatening the SkyWing inhabitants, and taking our resources," Sunset summarized, with a gesture of her talon, "I got this, Mother. Eagle and I spent week

figuring out our strategy. We'll win this battle, trust us."

Carmine smiled, and lifted her head. "I trust you and Eagle. I am sure this will go well," she paused "I'm proud of you, Sunset. Now go, and remember: making them feel small is the first step towards pushing them aside."

Sunset smiled, and held out her wing. Carmine touched it with her own. It was a sign to say "good luck", and Carmine remembered it was one of Gust's favorite gestures.

"Thank you, Mother. I'll see you in two days," she announced, dipping her head, and then took off, towards the sky.

Eagle was already hovering there, waiting for the Princess. The two exchanged a few words, and then flew off, towards the Kingdom of Sea.

Carmine smiled.

She saw it again, the same scene: Wisp flying off into the sunset, and her standing there, powerless.

But this wasn't the same.

She was Queen. Her kingdom was prospering. Her family was happy. And she had the most perfect daughter.

Carmine breathed. Time had passed, things weren't the same any more.

"I have grown so much since the day I saved Wisp. Since the day I got married. Since the day I became Queen. I... don't think my life is worth something only because of any of these. I had the power to make them happen... but I was never alone. Dragon believed in me all along, and I didn't let them down. I think- I think that's the only real power... willpower."

Carmine looked forward, frowning towards where Sunset and Eagle had disappeared.

"They'll be gone only two days... plus, they have each other."

She smiled once more and then spread her wings, taking off towards her future.

"What could ever go wrong?"

Art Credit

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Acknowledgments and closing words

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-/-

A few closing words from me, the author

Hello everyone.
If you have reached this point, you most probably have already finished reading the chapters of Carmine's story.
Tackling a popular subject like "power" is never easy. I feel like some aspects of it have already been covered to death. But I don't think Carmine's power is the conventional power you think a royal dragon has: her story was always controlled by her blood, but she fought against it to help others, only to realize that perhaps that wasn't helping anyone at all. Her true power was always willpower: a very strong determination to do something.
I really hope you have enjoyed it. I poured my heart into this story and these characters, and I really attempted to make them feel real.
If you have thoughts on the story or suggestions on what to write next, you can leave a comment here.
I look forward to writing more,
⚡Light⚡